

From 2014 to 2018, Mr Downer was Australian High Commissioner to the UK. Prior to this, he was Australia's longest-serving Minister for Foreign Affairs, a role he held from 1996 to 2007.

Mr Downer also served as Opposition Leader and leader of the Australian Liberal Party from 1994 to 1995 and was Member of the Australian Parliament for Mayo for over 20 years.

In addition to a range of other political and diplomatic roles, he was Executive Director of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and the United Nations Secretary General's Special Advisor on Cyprus, in which he worked on peace talks between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. He is currently Chairman of the UK think tank Policy Exchange and The Royal Over-Seas League and a trustee of the International Crisis Group.

UK foreign policy in Asia

1. In recent months commentary on the UK's relations with China has been driven by Huawei and COVID19. That's understandable but Britain needs to develop a sophisticated Indo-Pacific foreign policy, not simply a China policy. Let me explain what I mean.
2. The rise of China is the single most important geopolitical issue of our time. As history has shown, tensions inevitably emerge between rising powers and status quo powers. The challenge is for both to manage that relationship. For the West, led by the United States and the UK, there should be no policy of containment of China. We should engage China constructively not just in commercial terms but also as part of the architecture of the rules based international system. As China's weight grows, so should its role in international decision-making. That is entirely understandable.
3. For China's part, it needs to deal with the West in particular constructively and sensitively. It should not try to change the status quo by use of force but only through the rule of law. Equally, it should not use its greater economic influence to try to impose unwelcome policies or indeed punishment on other countries. And finally, Chinese leaders and diplomats should engage with the international community with good manners and the traditional language of diplomacy.
4. At the moment, we are not seeing China keep its side of this equation. While inevitably there is great distress around the world about the impact of COVID-19 on lives and economies,

China has reacted viciously, at least initially, to the proposal there should be an international investigation into how this terrible crisis has come about. Australia was the first country to propose an international investigation and the immediate reaction of Chinese officials was a fusillade of abuse directed towards the Australian government and economic threats to the Australian economy.

5. The harsh language used by Chinese diplomats in Europe has also consolidated the impression that China views the West with a degree of hostility. All this comes on top of Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. It has claimed by use of force the whole of the South China Sea as part of China's waters and in order to do so has militarised reefs and militarily threatened Southeast Asian countries. It has also ignored a ruling on the South China Sea by an international tribunal established under the Law of the Sea convention.

6. This sort of behaviour is entirely counter-productive. All it is doing is uniting the West against China. It reminds me of that old diplomatic warning: if you call a country an enemy it will become your enemy. China is at risk of doing that with the West.

7. The COVID-19 crisis gives China an opportunity to reset its diplomacy. Its agreement to a resolution in the world health assembly to establish a WHO led international investigation into the COVID-19 disaster is a step in the right direction. Beijing should also instruct its ambassadors to act within the norms of diplomatic good manners and abandon their warrior wolf bad language and aggression.

8. Over the last few years, China's much more aggressive tone has reminded countries in Asia of the importance of maintaining a balance of power in that part of the world. ASEAN countries – the 10 countries of Southeast Asia – do not want to be reduced to being Chinese satellite states. Put another way, they do not want to see a Chinese Monroe Doctrine in the east Asian hemisphere.

9. Equally, neither Japan nor South Korea want to see China dominate Asia. Yet at the same time, they are appropriately happy to work with China.

10. A balance of power in the Indo Pacific should be the geo-political objective of all major powers. The UK can play an important role in helping to maintain that balance of power.
11. Over the years, ASEAN has lead the way in building the political architecture of the Indo Pacific region. It hosts the annual security talks of regional foreign ministers known as the Asian Regional Forum. ASEAN founded the East Asia Summit which includes not just ASEAN and China, South Korea and Japan but also India and Australia. More recently the United States and Russia have been added as members.
12. And then there is APEC. Again, this brings together the leaders of the Asia Pacific countries to focus on regional economic liberalisation and cooperation. It has contributed substantially to good, Liberal economic policies throughout the region which have driven economic growth. And the much vaunted Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement emerged from APEC.
13. So where should the UK be placed in all this? The UK needs an Indo-Pacific strategy which immerses British interests not just in trade and investment but in the political and security architecture of the region.
14. A good starting point for the UK would be to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership. That would put the UK more comfortably into the economic orbit of the region.
15. Secondly, UK should also try to become a member of the ASEAN regional forum. That shouldn't be difficult as the EU is already a member.
16. Thirdly, the UK already has a treaty with Singapore, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand known as the Five Power Defence Arrangements. This is a very low key treaty arrangement which dates back to the early 1970s after the UK withdrew from east of Suez. The UK should invest more in this arrangement.
17. Fourthly, the UK should use its very substantial soft power in the Indo Pacific region more proactively than it currently does. It should more frequently send Royal Navy ships to the region for port visits and joint exercises with regional friends and allies. The Prime Minister, the foreign

secretary, the defence secretary and other ministers should make frequent visits to Asia and not just India and China. They need to build up their personal links with the Japanese leadership and make sure they are well in tune with the leaders of ASEAN countries as well as Australia and New Zealand.

18. Finally, British diplomats need to be more engaged in helping to resolve difficult regional issues. The UK has been active over the years in addressing the problems of Burma and, of course, Hong Kong. The UK has sent aircraft and ships to the South China Sea to reinforce freedom of navigation through that vital part of the world but the UK needs to be more heavily engaged in the diplomacy of the issue and to have more to say on, for example, North Korea.

19. A comprehensive Indo Pacific strategy should be formally articulated by the Prime Minister or the foreign secretary. After all, the government quite rightly talks about post-Brexit Global Britain. The UK must be prepared to play its full role in the affairs of the world. In past decades it has retreated into becoming a regional power. It now needs to resume its position as a global power. It is, after all, a very privileged nation sitting as a permanent member of the UN security council with a veto. Only four other countries have that privilege. Consistent with that privilege, the UK should be more heavily engaged in the Indo Pacific region.

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