What Role Can Europe Play in Easing Conflict in Asia?

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The EU appears to be stepping up engagement on the South China Sea and other issues, and has a lot to offer, not least the normative values it has.

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Beijing is trying to define the ideological division between China and the US, putting pressure on other countries to take sides.

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A move to return the country 'east of Suez' is worth considering: Britain could be a key player in a number of ways.

Ramon Pacheco Pardo
Europe's stake in the Korean Peninsula may not be obvious. But in aid, trade, sanctions and nuclear expertise, it brings a lot to the table.
Forward Deployed and Committed: Britain’s Post-Brexit Indo-Pacific Strategy

By Alessio Patalano

IN FEBRUARY 2019, Gavin Williamson, at the time the UK defense secretary, announced his support for the forward deployment in East Asia of a naval asset as part of a more active Indo-Pacific strategy. Some mainstream media reacted with skepticism to the announcement by the conservative politician, who was sacked from his post in May. In this essay, I argue that Williamson’s idea is rather a potentially significant step in the UK’s attempt to upgrade its profile in the wider Indo-Pacific region. I further explore how the proposal could be seen as the opening salvo of a potential new “doctrine” marking the UK’s return “east of Suez,” with a strategy aimed at “shaping” the regional security environment. Such a strategy would support key UK interests, notably reassuring allies and engaging competitors. It would also enhance the UK’s profile as a global actor, favoring the maintenance of regional stability and development of economic prosperity with a resident rather than the current regular presence.

WHAT’S AT STAKE EAST OF SUEZ?
Former Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s decision to withdraw from east of Suez in 1968 did not mark the full relinquishing of the British military presence from the broader Indo-Pacific region. On the contrary, the UK naval contribution to the Gulf area continued to support regional security. Yet, the first real policy shift in regard to British re-engagement east of Suez occurred in spring of 2013 when then prime minister David Cameron signaled his intention to enhance the UK’s strategic profile. Since then, the meaning of “being back east of Suez” has widened, and today the UK...
government seems committed to deploy British forces to tackle security issues from the Arabian Sea to the South and East China Seas. The experience of British vessels deployed in the region over the last two years would suggest as much.

In part as a result of the ambitions of a “global Britain” post-Brexit, a more robust debate has been taking place in London over the redefinition of the country’s strategic interests for such a renewed commitment. Within this context, three core aspects define the UK’s strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific: meeting existing treaty commitments and obligations; supporting regional allies and strengthening trans-Atlantic relations; and sustaining the existing maritime order to favor economic prosperity and political stability.

The first set of interests unfolds predominantly from the UK’s role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, as part of the Five Powers Defense Arrangements (FPDA) and in relation to Five Eyes, an intelligence-sharing arrangement that includes Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the US and the UK. The UK is also part of the UN Command overseeing the Korean War armistice and is involved in implementing sanctions against North Korea. The armistice implies no automatic commitment of UK forces should hostilities occur on the Korean Peninsula, but there is, nonetheless, an international expectation for the UK to be involved in meeting such a challenge. Similarly, the FPDA and Five Eyes do not automatically commit UK forces to regional crises, but they inevitably come with an expectation of continuous security engagement. Such expectations are likely to remain strong, especially after Brexit.

Provided the existence of both traditional and non-traditional security challenges, it is a strategic interest of the UK to support partners and allies, notably Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, as well as to maintain defense ties with Commonwealth countries. These actors nurture a reasonable expectation for the UK to contribute to managing security in the Indo-Pacific for historical reasons and as a result of the UK’s international standing and ambitions. In turn, this network of partnerships is a potentially significant asset to maximize UK influence. In particular, given US interests in the Indo-Pacific, a sustainable and regular UK defense role within the region would likely also enhance British relevance and leadership in trans-Atlantic relations.

More broadly, however, as an export-oriented economy and a member of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) the UK has a fundamental interest in preserving the international maritime order. The UK has a strategic interest in the respect of freedom of navigation and overflight and of the rule of law in managing maritime and territorial disputes. Actions that undermine these principles destabilize the maritime order by setting problematic precedents that might apply from the Baltic Sea to the South Atlantic, from Africa to South America and Asia. This risk should not be underestimated, given that some 57 percent of all maritime boundaries remain “unresolved.”

Against these strategic interests, and in light of the rising pressure on regional actors in the Indo-Pacific to choose sides in the competition between the US and China, the UK’s ambition to return east of Suez is particularly desirable. The UK could, in fact, play a stabilizing role by supporting allies, reassuring and empowering partners, and signaling and deterring competitors. Such a role should aim at shaping regional security by regularly supporting good order at sea and crisis prevention, and by promoting capacity building. In times of crisis, the military power underwriting a shaping strategy would form the backbone of a quick response force working with allies to address security challenges from natural disasters to excessive maritime claims.

A NEW STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

For British strategic interests to be met, a shift in the policy framework is needed, and the current policy debate in the UK would suggest that this process is taking place. Moving past the post-colonial flavor of the term “Far East,” official UK documents have come to fully appreciate the centrality of Asia in international affairs. The east is no longer far away. Indeed, the UK government has been paying growing attention to the impact of regional security in East Asia or the Asia-Pacific region on its own national security agenda.

For this reason, part of the official UK debate has been focused on developing a new reference framework for engagement in East Asia. The UK’s closest security partners in the region — Japan, Australia and the US — have all adopted the Indo-Pacific framework to define their actions in East Asia. This construct has been in use in Australia since the early 2000s. The Indo-Pacific is crucially relevant to UK strategy for three reasons:

• It is a maritime-centric framework. Geographically, the Indo-Pacific highlights the connectivity linking the Arabian Sea to the Sea of Japan, through the South and East China Seas, and the South Pacific.

• It stresses Asia’s growing political connection to, and economic interdependence with, state actors in Africa, the Gulf and Middle East and Europe.

• Sea lanes along the Indo-Pacific are key to economic development, access to primary resources, and the trading of finished and unfinished goods.

In particular, the Indo-Pacific framework offers an opportunity to align the notion of a global Britain with East Asia’s economic ambitions, and to put in context the UK’s contribution to regional security in concert with its closest allies and partners. Within this framework, it would be possible for the UK to develop a strategy that would nicely match its core strategic interests. Such a strategy would aim at enhancing respect for the rule of law, especially freedom of navigation and overflight to ensure unfettered connectivity; leveraging the centrality of maritime access and transport to advance economic prosperity; and investing in capacity-building and crisis management to promote stability.

While the UK government has not taken an official position on the Indo-Pacific construct, it is not unreasonable to assume that some version of such a construct may very well inform the UK’s strategy of re-engagement with the region. Adopting a new framework capturing the maritime-centric nature of the region and British interests in it would make sense for three reasons. First, it would confirm a strategic shift in the national defense posture. This would emphasize a restructuring of capabilities away from the land-centric military balance needed to conduct the counter-insurgency operations of the recent past. Second, it would indicate a proactive stance aimed at maintaining the existing maritime order as a way “to shore up the global system of rules and standards” in order to defend allies and support partners against revisionist actions. Third, it would reassert a multilateral international profile to promote stability. This would enable the UK to maximize the effect and influence of regionally deployed capabilities by working in close coordination with regional partners, notably Japan, Australia and South Korea, in addition to the US.

STRATEGY BASED ON A RESIDENT PRESENCE

The ability to sustain a presence on a regular basis rests at the heart of a successful strategy aimed at shaping the stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific. Crucially, such a presence would be designed to nurture and support regional frameworks promoting security co-operation. In this context, recent UK experience strongly suggests a British preference to shape the landscape with-
out giving the impression of promoting a form of containment against China. For example, the US has recently shown clear support for the Quadilateral Security Dialogue involving the US, Japan, Australia and India. But the dialogue remains in its infancy because of the perception — especially in India — that it is intended to contain China.

The UK has shown relevant interest in this format, but it is also focused on developing the country’s existing wide portfolio of defense arrangements. In this context, trilateral co-operation with Japan and the US has been a very effective way to generate focused action with clear deliverables on maritime stability. Recent bilateral exercises with South Korea and Australia have further shown the UK’s intention to build upon its strong network of partners as a way to maximize the impact of its defense engagement by means of enhanced regional interoperability.

In a part of the world where access and poise define defense engagement, the military core is inherently maritime. This would allow the UK to take advantage of the flexibility and scalability of maritime assets to play a meaningful security role across numerous issues: from support in humanitarian crises to capacity building, military exercises and more robust acts of presence and deterrence. Ideally, an effective UK defense posture in the Indo-Pacific would have three basic features:

- Reliable picture-building capacity. These should draw upon a mix of national efforts and information sharing with allies;
- Significant scope for interoperability and integration. This should be achieved with exercises and enhanced, targeted military-to-military relations with allies, notably with Australia and Japan;
- A maritime-centric posture. In a region where maritime connectivity is crucial, naval assets are critical to maximize presence and response.

Crucially, a meaningful UK defense role would be underwritten by the nature of the commitment to the region. This is why a resident presence, more than its scale and composition, is key to its political and strategic value. Recent deployments of major surface combatants in the East and South China Seas have done much to address prior absence (a five-year hiatus) by showcasing the UK’s support for both the regional maritime order and its allies. Yet, recent actions have highlighted the deeper problem of sustaining a military presence over such an extended geographic area for longer periods of time at acceptable costs.

It is within this context that Williamson’s proposal becomes an interesting sign of real interest within the UK government to re-engage in the East Asian part of the regional space east of Suez. Indeed, an East Asian base would offer a more cost-effective and strategically relevant option for an Indo-Pacific posture. Such an option would be feasible if linked to an agenda aimed at working closely with allies. In particular, the re-establishment of forward-deployed British military capabilities in the region should be pursued together with base access agreements. A forward-deployed force would showcase the global nature of the UK’s international security profile.

Among the UK’s allies, Australia is a natural option for permanent basing — especially as the country has signed up to re-introduce British built capabilities (Type 26 frigate) at the heart of its future fleet. Further, Japan should be considered as an ideal partner for a base access agreement in Northeast Asia — given both its close military ties with the US and the development of a trilateral partnership with the UK. The UK and Japan have been particularly effective in enhancing maritime and expeditious co-operation, as the unprecedented levels of joint exercises as well as close co-operation in the UN Security Council on sanctions vis-à-vis North Korea attest. Such renewed interest in the bilateral relation-

ship is again an important sign of the UK’s intentions and opportunities. A new base in Australia, access to Japanese bases, combined with existing arrangements in Bahrain, Duqm, Singapore and Brunei, would enable the UK to maximise power and influence, even with limited capabilities.

On capabilities, Williamson’s speech referred to the possibility to deploy a future assault ship to the region, something akin to an amphibious ship. Such a military presence should be robust enough to perform a variety of constabulary and military missions, yet it should avoid antagonizing potential competitors. Expeditionary capabilities possess poise and flexibility, visibility and affordability. They are ideally suited to support robust military actions in the case of contesting excessive maritime claims as well as other critical security functions — from capacity building to humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and support for nationals overseas. In a region that is prone to man-made and natural disasters, a force capable of being at the forefront of this array of security challenges would be performing deterrence and relationship-building functions at the same time.

Having this capability readily available in the region would be a floating statement that Britain is a global player. Deterrence and diplomacy are two sides of one political coin, and an asset as substantive as an amphibious ship would allow the UK to perform both, including engaging with actors such as China. They would sustain the development of ties and promote military understanding from a constructive and meaningful position. Williamson’s idea to deploy one future “Littoral Strike Ship” in the Indo-Pacific is particularly relevant in this regard.

FORWARD DEPLOYED, COMMITTED TO SHAPE

The uncertainty around the outcome of the Brexit process remains a major factor in the UK’s ability to clearly map its future profile as an international security actor. Yet, over the past few months, a number of signs have indicated the government’s intention to fully review its defense role in East Asia. Williamson’s aspirations for his department in this regard represented the most articulated manifestation of such policy ambitions. In her first policy speech, new Defence Secretary Penny Mordaunt confirmed this trajectory of travel.

Within an Indo-Pacific strategic framework, the UK has the potential to translate ambitions into reality. A forward-deployed posture aimed at shaping regional stability and supporting the economic prosperity of a maritime-centric region would stand at the heart of a UK Indo-Pacific strategy. A readily available asset in the region — especially an amphibious ship — would be a floating emblem of the UK in a globalized world. Such a proactive security role would be designed to produce impact and influence by enhancing and supporting allies. As Japanese and Australian senior political figures have repeatedly suggested, regional allies want more Britain, not less.

A force structure in the Indo-Pacific developed around an amphibious ship would maximize effectiveness, keeping the costs of a global UK defense posture under control. Williamson has suggested that global Britain “has to be about action.” As he put it, global Britain has to be about “taking action alongside our friends and allies: Action to strengthen the hand of fragile nations and to support those who face natural disasters; action to oppose those who flout international law.” Whether this is going to be the essence of a new doctrine in foreign and security policy remains to be seen. It nonetheless suggests a desire to propel the present into the future.