

Staying In Step

The US “Pivot” and UK Strategic Choices

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In 2011, the Obama administration announced that the United States needed to make “a strategic pivot” in its foreign policy, in which it would downsize the US presence in the Middle East and Afghanistan over the next decade and turn attention to and, particularly, invest more in the Asia-Pacific region.¹ This decision has since been recharacterized as a “rebalancing” of US policy in the region.² The decision to pursue such a strategy was mainly driven by perceptions of a growing “triumphalist attitude” in the leadership of a rising China and evidence that Chinese leaders would leverage their newfound power to play a much greater role in influencing events in the Asia-Pacific region. This strategic decision is complicated by the fact that the United States is trying to make this switch at a time when it is beset by a range of domestic challenges—not the least, strained finances. Foreign policy seemed to be little more than a background issue for most voters in the recent presidential election. The question posed by the “traditional” allies of the United States in Europe, and elsewhere, is just how the new Asian strategy will affect US commitments in the rest of the world as it redeploys finite and, most likely, reduced resources to meet new challenges.

The declaration of a US “pivot” to Asia poses some compelling challenges, particularly for the United Kingdom (UK) which has, increasingly, adopted a position on world affairs almost entirely driven by its close relationship with the United States. The United Kingdom has formally declared that its “pre-eminent defence and security relationship [is] with the US.”³ Whether the relationship between the two countries is actually “special,” or is just one of many bilateral partnerships between the United States and its allies, the United Kingdom has taken on the

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job of “transatlantic bridge” between the North American and European members of NATO. It has supported the United States wholeheartedly—even when that support has resulted in significant impacts on international legitimacy and wider support. The effects of a continuing recession, constant pressure to reduce deficit spending, and the recovery from the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts suggest that there is likely to be little money available for new capability or any significant increase in resources. The shift of US focus eastward therefore poses a significant challenge for the United Kingdom if it is to retain influence upon the United States and, thereby, maintain its current position as a world power.

Although there is general resignation in Europe to the strategy shift and despite explicit reassurance to the contrary from the new US secretary of state,⁴ there is a concern that the shift of focus away from the region may leave gaps in regional defense. However, by its very nature, British foreign and defense policy is global. The United Kingdom has commercial, diplomatic, historical and military links with the Asia-Pacific region and, increasingly, has indicated that this area will be of growing importance in the coming decades. Examining the pivot from the perspective of the United Kingdom, this article argues that the new US Asian strategy provides a number of opportunities to strengthen and deepen the UK-US relationship as we move into an increasingly interdependent global era. It first establishes the importance of the Asia-Pacific region to the United Kingdom, both in terms of history but also from the perspective of current diplomatic, trade, and defense initiatives. It then examines the main strategic choices open to the United Kingdom if its relationship with the United States is to remain relevant and identifies and discusses three strategic concerns: European “burden-sharing” or “back-filling”; leverage of current arrangements and influence in the region, such as basing agreements and alliances; and a rebalancing of British military force structures to provide more utility for employment in support of US-led operations in the region. It then considers the nature of the future world and its impact on any strategic choices. The research suggests that, far from being a threat, the US pivot to Asia provides Britain with a number of opportunities to strengthen its relationship with the United States and enhance its long-standing relationship beyond that of the Atlantic “bridge.”

UK Asia-Pacific Perspective

The Far East is an area which has long held a fascination for Britain and, since the earliest days of the British Empire, has been a source of economic prosperity. It is also a region that engenders deep emotions, with memories of the Second World War in the Pacific and the wars in Korea and Malaya driving both pride and humiliation.⁵ The tragedy of the fall of Singapore was possibly one of the worst periods in recent British history, perhaps in sharp contrast to the contribution by British forces to the anti-communist campaign in Malaya—often held up to be the model for how to conduct counterinsurgency operations.⁶ More recently, the British have viewed the Far East as a source of innovation, an area providing vibrant new business opportunities, and as a popular tourist destination. Expanding from the Asia-Pacific area specifically, Britain has long-standing ties with the wider Indian Ocean and its bordering nations, an area that is likely to play an increasingly vital role in the rise of the East. Middle Eastern oil and gas will remain crucial to the developing economies in the Far East, and the Indian Ocean will provide the main trade routes by which it is delivered. The routes will transit vital choke points, such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca, and the Horn of Africa, and the security of such trade must play a key role in any Asian strategy.⁷ In addition, as China looks to new regions for trade and natural resources, the impact of events as far away as Africa and South America cannot be ignored. Britain has significant influence and interests in all these areas.

From a military perspective, the United Kingdom has a small permanent footprint in the Asia-Pacific region of merely 1,000 or so personnel. This is in contrast to the large force structures maintained in the region until the middle of the last century. Withdrawal from “East of Suez,” driven by a fast deteriorating financial position, commenced in the 1960s, with the United Kingdom steadily withdrawing the several thousand troops it had based in the Asia-Pacific region, and, in particular, greatly reducing its footprint at its naval base in Singapore. The final act of military withdrawal from British-owned bases did not, however, take place until 1997 when Britain handed back the Crown Colony of Hong Kong and the New Territories to China. The largest current concentration of British military personnel is in Brunei. The British garrison in Brunei serves at the behest of the Sultan of Brunei, who meets a large proportion of the operating costs of the force to provide security for

his country. There has been a British military presence in Brunei since 1962, and today the garrison consists of some 900 personnel, mainly from the Royal Gurkha Rifles, supported by a small flight of helicopters. The United Kingdom also maintains its primary jungle warfare school in the sultanate.⁸ The only other permanent UK military presence of any note in the region is in Singapore, where Britain owns a large fuel depot and a number of berthing wharves in Sembawang dockyard. This facility provides access and fueling for three escort-sized vessels and limited spares support. The fuel depot is, allegedly, the second largest of its type in the Asia-Pacific region and is therefore an indispensable asset for the Royal Navy and allied navies.⁹

In addition to these two permanent installations, the United Kingdom maintains a network of defense attachés and advisors in embassies and consulates throughout the region and a large number of exchange postings, particularly with Australia and New Zealand. Of particular note with regard to these latter countries is Exercise Long Look, which enables a large number of UK, New Zealand, and Australian personnel to work embedded in each other's services for short-term periods (approximately four months). On 18 January 2013, British defence minister Phillip Hammond signed a treaty with the Australian defence minister Stephen Smith to formalize further Anglo-Australian defence cooperation, pledging the two countries to work together in areas such as cyber security, defense reform, personnel exchange, equipment, and science and technology.¹⁰ There are also reasonably regular visits by Royal Air Force aircraft and Royal Navy vessels, but operational demands in Afghanistan and elsewhere, and the severely limited budget, have currently curtailed the magnitude and frequency of these visits. Despite the reduction in permanent, declared physical military presence in the region, the United Kingdom is committed to a major formal defense agreement there. This is the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA). The United Kingdom, Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Singapore devised this loose alliance in April 1971 to share the responsibility for the defense and security of peninsular Malaysia and Singapore—particularly against the threat of a resurgent Indonesia. This series of bilateral arrangements replaced the Anglo-Malaya Defence Agreement (AMDA) after Britain's decision to withdraw permanently based forces from the region in 1967.¹¹

The FPDA is a useful grouping and serves the region well. It has not only served as a rationale for the United Kingdom to remain engaged

in the region (and has thus proved a useful political lever in times of shrinking defense budgets), but it has also benefited the other nations in the alliance by keeping a leading world player physically engaged. Not only does this keep a permanent member of the UN Security Council tied to issues in the area, but also provides access, both for exercises and if necessary during conflict, to high-end military capabilities such as amphibious maneuver, attack submarines, and air-to-air refueling. The cost of maintaining FPDA membership is relatively small but provides reassurance to nations that the United Kingdom is still interested in the region. Perhaps most crucially, it provides no legal obligation other than to consult—no nation is committed to military action in support of another as part of this treaty. As the other nations in the FPDA—especially Singapore and Malaysia—have developed their armed forces, a physical security guarantee from the United Kingdom has therefore become less important than efforts to build capacity by providing access to expertise and high-capability platforms and a shared voice in the international arena. Thus, the United Kingdom is still able to wield significant influence despite strained financial circumstances.¹²

Links with the region are far wider than purely military activity. In the economic arena, there are very healthy trade relationships and codependence between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. By far the most useful lens with which to look at this activity is that of the European Union (EU), of which Britain is a member (although not linked to the common currency of the euro). Notwithstanding the struggle with which the Eurozone has been contending since the start of the global recession, the *CIA World Factbook* lists the EU as the world's largest economy, just \$30 billion ahead of the United States and \$3.6 trillion ahead of China.¹³ Indeed, the close interest the international community has maintained in the Eurozone crisis and its impact on world markets clearly demonstrates the importance of the EU as a global economic player. Furthermore, evidence suggests that as the United States turns its attention to Asia, China has been increasingly turning to Europe. The mutual trade relationship between China and the EU is the biggest economic partnership for each party. China imports more from the EU than from anywhere else in the world and invests 33 percent of its foreign direct investment (FDI) in Europe—second only to Asia (49 percent) and surprisingly more than the 28 percent it invests in the United States. In early 2012, the United Kingdom was the largest source of FDI into

China from within the EU. The amount of this investment had grown significantly over the previous few years—by 40 percent in 2010 and by 20 percent in 2011.¹⁴ To underline this commitment, Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne made a trip to China in January 2012. Osborne urged China to invest further in British infrastructure and, following this trip, China used its sovereign wealth to acquire a stake in a major UK water utility.¹⁵ Even more recently, the Bank of England faces increasing pressure to support renminbi trading in London to boost the nascent market in China's tightly controlled currency. The *Financial Times* quotes a senior Bank of England spokesman as saying, "The Bank has been and remains fully engaged with the City of London initiative to develop London as a center of renminbi trading and is in regular dialogue with the People's Bank of China on a range of issues."¹⁶ Furthermore, in a recent Fullerton Lecture, Foreign Secretary William Hague described Asia as "the engine of the world's growth today" and committed Britain to be "part of that success story."¹⁷ He went on to state that British exports to the Asia-Pacific region have increased 20 percent year on year, but that much more needs to be done to encourage economic growth in an economy that depends "overwhelmingly on expanding trade and investment." He recognized the immense opportunity that lies in the vast markets of the Asia-Pacific region and described Britain's ambitious targets to increase, and in some cases double, bilateral trade between the United Kingdom and China, India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and South Korea within the next five years; the overall drive is to double British exports to £1 trillion a year by 2020.¹⁸ Most recently, Foreign Minister Hugo Swire restated a previous commitment to the Anglo-Japanese relationship saying in a speech prior to a visit to the region, "Whether it is global trade or international peacekeeping our relationship with Japan is fundamental to UK foreign policy, not just in Asia but around the world."¹⁹

Britain has also increased, significantly, its diplomatic activity in Asia since 2010. A series of visits to the region by senior politicians and members of the royal family has spearheaded this initiative, but there have also been significant increases in professional diplomatic staff in embassies and consulates across the Asia-Pacific area. The United Kingdom is one of the few countries in the West that is expanding its diplomatic network at a time of economic crisis. The largest focus of this diplomatic expansion is in Asia, with eight new British diplomatic posts in Asia to

be established by 2015. Separately, Britain will also deploy around 60 extra staff to China, 30 to India, and another 50 across Asian networks in Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Burma, Singapore, Cambodia, Brunei, North and South Korea, and Mongolia. As an interesting aside, the Foreign and Commonwealth office has funded an initiative to increase by 40 percent the number of staff who speak Chinese.²⁰ The British Embassy in Laos, closed in 1985, is to be reopened so the United Kingdom will then be represented in each Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member state. This is a deliberate move ahead of the planned transformation of the ASEAN into a single, highly competitive market—a clear indication of UK economic intentions in Asia.

Finally, the United Kingdom has a large Asian diaspora. People originating from the subcontinent (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) make up around six percent of the UK population. This constituency is likely to be very influential in forming UK policy in the future, both in developing business ties and cultural exchanges, but also in the event of a future regional conflict, it could have significant influence on British strategic involvement. This is especially significant given the importance of the Indian Ocean and its surrounding countries. There is also a large Chinese community comprising just less than one percent.²¹ Links with Hong Kong remain strong, even after its return to Chinese rule in 1997. Cultural ties between Britain and these regions are resilient, and long-established cultural relationships are highly influential. For instance, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is the world's largest international broadcaster and, for several years, the largest audiences for its World Service have been in the Middle East and Asia. Transmission stations in Britain, Cyprus, Oman, and Thailand and a wide selection of cable and satellite channels transmit in all the principal languages of the region, with the largest audiences being in English, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, and a number of other South Asian languages. There are broadcasts in both Mandarin and Cantonese Chinese. Twenty-four-hour television broadcasting in Arabic and Farsi has proved influential in key regions, particularly as a trusted alternative view to Al Jazeera.²² It is essential to remember that the United Kingdom and the United States share remarkably similar views on the importance of international and economic norms and, essentially, a liberal world order. Both countries support open free markets, legal transparency, popular self-determination,

and a free press; cooperation and partnership options extend far beyond geopolitical affairs.

UK Strategic Choices

The future interests of the United Kingdom are thus closely entwined with the Asia-Pacific region, and it is difficult to think of a future where the region will not play a strategically significant role. It is clear that the United Kingdom should view US concerns in Asia, and its increasing desire to bring stability to the region, as very much in line with British interests. Britain should, therefore, aim to support the US “Asian pivot” initiative wherever possible, recognizing resource limitations at home and, at the very least, see it as an opportunity to strengthen UK-US partnerships. Now consider the main options available to Britain to support this grand strategy.

The first concern as the United Kingdom seeks a strategy against the background of the US shift to Asia is that of developing European defense activity. The EU, if considered as an entity, is, at first glance, the second largest military power in the world. France and the United Kingdom alone spend much the same as China in absolute terms on military expenditures. When the defense budgets of Germany, Italy, Spain, Greece, and Poland are added, the EU spends roughly \$240 billion on its armed forces—almost twice as much as China and one-third the amount of the United States.²³ However, the conversion of this spending into comparative military power is problematic; manning costs in the West are very much the driver of defense spending, and the coordination of the forces of the European nations—all sovereign countries with individual interests and aspirations—to produce unified military power is far from straightforward. However, even as the US focus shifts eastward, there remain a number of key international issues in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, the western Indian Ocean, and Africa. These issues include building the Libyan economy and society and creating a Mediterranean economic community that can give North African and some Middle East countries real reason to reform. These issues will still require a considerable investment, and it is perhaps here that Britain could use its influence to encourage Europe to “burden share” to enable US redeployment. While efforts to develop a common European security and defense policy have been sporadic and

beset with irreconcilable national interests, bilateral or multilateral arrangements offer more hope of success. In particular, the historic Anglo-French agreement signed at Lancaster House on 17 February 2012 may prove a model for future European cooperation and the leadership of European operations.²⁴ European leadership would be welcomed in the continuation of efforts to fight pirates off the coast of Somalia; the provision of a rapid-deployment capability to prevent eruptions of violence, such as those in recent years in Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast; in helping to patrol the drug routes along the coast of western Africa; or even to exercise the rights of all countries to navigate freely in the Strait of Hormuz. Ongoing operations in Mali and the wider Sahel—where France is currently providing the lead (with British ISR and transport support) of what it intends will eventually become a largely African military operation—provide an example of how Europe can, in effect, “cover America’s back” as it concentrates its main effort in the Pacific. It should also be remembered that, diplomatically, Europe holds two of five permanent seats on the UN Security Council and, with the third largest population in the world after India and China (all living under democratic rule), is largely allied with the United States in a zone of peace, democracy, and wealth.

Many NATO countries have apparently been counting on US military power in the region to offset their own deep defense reductions and were thus deeply concerned about the pivot. British defence secretary Phillip Hammond recently said that, instead of worrying about the cutbacks, the allies must recognize that “as a result, European nations, including the UK, will need to do much more of the heavy lifting in the security of their own region,” including both Europe itself and the Middle East, Northern Africa, and the Horn of Africa, which he called “the near abroad.” “This is not the end of Atlanticism, but the beginning of a new, more balanced relationship in the [NATO] alliance.”²⁵ However, Britain’s relationship with the EU has never been straightforward, and current discussions suggest there may be a future for the United Kingdom outside the EU. The United States has sounded a cautionary note, stating clearly that an Atlanticist Britain is not a direct alternative to a Britain that plays a central role in Europe and that it “believes that the ‘special relationship’ is best served by the UK remaining at the heart of Europe.”²⁶

A further strategic possibility to consider is aiding operations by providing basing in the Asia-Pacific region and using UK influence to ease

access. The massive air base and port at Diego Garcia in the British Indian Ocean Territories and the previously mentioned Singapore fleet facilities are invaluable for power projection, both into the region and for operations in the wider Indian Ocean (they played a large role supporting US operations during recent conflicts in Iraq and the global war on terror). In addition, Britain's ability to leverage its FPDA allies and its other long-standing diplomatic relationships in the region to support US initiatives and to facilitate access and overflight would likely prove a significant asset. Finally, Britain's membership in the P5 (group of permanent members of the UN Security Council) would not only enable it to support the United States directly in obtaining legitimacy for its actions within the UN itself, but could possibly provide Britain leverage in its dealings with the smaller nations in the region. Traditional links to Britain, such as commonwealth membership, provide smaller countries with access to a P5 member that is less partisan or diplomatically "charged" than the United States or China (although this could be arguable) and that may provide support for individual regional concerns in the council without necessarily antagonizing "great-power" politics. This support may in turn be used to garner support for wider US initiatives in the region.


From a purely military perspective—in traditional terms of warships, divisions, and aircraft—it would appear that the United Kingdom has little to offer the United States. Successive defense reviews have reduced the size of Britain's armed forces considerably, and the war in Afghanistan has depleted both materiel and broader war-fighting experience, as the forces have concentrated on intensive counterinsurgency and stability operations. It will require some time to recover and restock for the full range of capabilities to be restored. However, Britain's armed forces still bring proven capabilities and experience. It remains a leading contributor to NATO, is the world's third-largest financial contributor to UN peace-keeping operations, and is one of the five nuclear weapons states recognized by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Britain thus retains some measure of global influence.²⁷ Moreover, the Strategic Defence and Security Review conducted in 2010 and the subsequent National Security Strategy recognize the UK's reliance on global trade and stress that Britain must maintain a power-projection capability of highly competent expeditionary forces to deal with emerging problems "at source," tackling threats before they reach the homeland.²⁸ While

the United States does not lack physical combat power, a capable, connected, deployable force able to operate easily alongside US forces and within an integrated command structure is likely to prove an asset in future global operations—and will remain influential and relevant. Less obviously, Britain's highly respected intelligence services (particularly signals and communications intelligence), its special forces, its contribution to the global missile warning network, and some “niche” assets such as airborne warning and control and “Rivet Joint” signals intelligence aircraft provide valuable support to US operations. That said, several senior commentators in the United States have already suggested that any further cuts in defense spending could severely test this relationship. So, the British government must remain mindful of the broader effects when considering future defense reviews.²⁹

The Future Impact

Thus far, a rather traditional worldview has measured issues against the background of the traditional state system and international affairs as currently constituted. However, states in the future world are likely to become increasingly interdependent and interconnected, and traditional national boundaries will likely become more porous. An increasing level of international business and diplomatic affairs will make unrestricted access to the so-called global commons of the sea, air, space, and cyberspace ever more vital.³⁰ Therefore, it becomes increasingly obvious that any future world power would be ill-advised to limit its strategy purely in terms of geography or regions of interest. The effects of the Chinese antisatellite tests in January 2007 and January 2010 (and early reporting suggests 2013) which caused significant debris fields in busy orbits are a harbinger of the extensive disruption that irresponsible behavior, or intentional attacks, could have on global operations across all areas of human activity.³¹ The widespread repercussions of aggressive actions in cyberspace, as exemplified by the attacks on the Estonian banking system,³² or by the Stuxnet virus in Iran, further demonstrate that a global outlook is required when enumerating national interest. It is no longer sufficient to designate regional areas of concern, or, indeed, divide the world into “regions of influence.” Again, the Anglo-American emphasis on norms of international behavior comes to the fore.

Britain considers its partnership with the United States vital to its security and economic well-being and seeks to maximize its influence on US policymaking. Many in Europe have seen the US shift to Asia as threatening due to their zero-sum philosophy; reality is a lot more nuanced. A number of options are available to Britain in the wake of the pivot to maintain relevance or enhance its influence upon the United States. Britain has a long history in the Asia-Pacific region and has a number of well-developed diplomatic and military relationships in the region on which it can draw. It also has a significant trade relationship with the region, particularly with China and Japan, and as a member of the EU. As a leading member of NATO and the EU, Britain should continue in its attempts to influence European nations to take more of a share in providing security in Europe and the near abroad, releasing the pressure on US forces to be redeployed to the Asia-Pacific region. Britain can also encourage burden-sharing and take a leading role in facilitating international cooperation in the provision of global “goods” such as the prevention of piracy and in counterterrorism. The United Kingdom is an influential P5 member of the UN Security Council and still possesses credible, deployable armed forces that are interoperable with those of the United States. In addition, it can enable unique access to the region and has certain niche areas of expertise and capability that would provide significant support to US operations. Therefore, UK policymakers should see the US strategic rebalancing to Asia as an opportunity rather than a threat, providing as it does, security in an area of global economic importance but also opening broader opportunities to stay in step with the United States, further develop influence, and remain relevant to the relationship.

The UK’s economic recovery and continuing prosperity, as with those of most developed countries, depend on global stability and growth. The country has always been a trading nation and will not prosper without a sustained economy, continued access to new markets and new sources of inward investment, and a global commons that is secure. The US pivot to Asia must, therefore, be seen not as a “distraction” from Europe and the Middle East but as an attempt to support stability and security worldwide and therefore as opening new opportunities for prosperity and peace. 

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