

# Briefing Memo

## The UK's Military Commitment to the Indo-Pacific

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### Introduction

British commitment to the Indo-Pacific has been gaining momentum recently, even in military affairs. Due to the UK's decline, during the Cold War, most British forces withdrew from the Indo-Pacific, known as "East of Suez" at the time, by the late 1970s, and the UK lost its role in the region. However, in recent years, there has been a tendency for British military commitment to the Indo-Pacific, also referred to as a return to "East of Suez."<sup>1</sup> This extends not only to the Gulf region (the Middle East), where the UK has historically had deep ties, but also to cooperation with Southeast Asia and, by extension, with Japan. That said, it is worth noting that the UK has been strengthening its military presence in the Indo-Pacific, even though it is still a small-scale deployment.

However, it can be pointed out that the UK's military commitment to the Indo-Pacific is of a slightly different nature compared to that of the US and France, which are also involved in the region. It goes without saying that the US has its military forces and allies in the Indo-Pacific, and both the US Department of State and the US Department of Defense are formulating strategies for the Indo-Pacific.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Ministry of Armed Forces of France, which is the only country in Europe other than the UK to have military deployment in the Indo-Pacific, has formulated a strategy of "France and Security in the Indo-Pacific," which positions France as a native state with its own territory in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, the UK has not yet formulated an official strategy for the Indo-Pacific. As a reason for this, there has not been a unified government view on the concept of a Global Britain after the UK's withdrawal (Brexit) from the European Union (EU), which can relate to the British military commitment to the Indo-Pacific.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the UK does not have allies in the Indo-Pacific like the US, nor does it have a relatively large number of territories like France (except for some British territories such as Diego Garcia). In that sense, the UK's military commitment to the Indo-Pacific

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper "East of Suez" and "Indo-Pacific" are treated as the same geographical region. "East of Suez" is used to include the context of the UK's historical transition, and "Indo-Pacific" is used to refer to other contexts especially current issues.

<sup>2</sup> US Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (June 2019); US Department of State, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* (November 2019).

<sup>3</sup> French Ministry of the Armed Forces, *France and Security in the Indo-Pacific* (May 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Li Jie Sheng, "Where is Britain's Indo-Pacific Strategy? The lack of a British Indo-Pacific policy paper has an impact on U.K. engagement," *The Diplomat*, June 7, 2019.

would be somewhat instable when compared to the US and France. In the absence of a unified view of the Indo-Pacific in the UK, what then is the background behind the development in recent years of British military commitment to the Indo-Pacific? This paper examines the evolution of British military deployments in the Indo-Pacific and the current discussions on Brexit and Global Britain, including the perspectives of the Conservative Party that promotes the UK's Indo-Pacific commitment.

## **1 Withdrawal from “East of Suez” – Losing a Role and Limited Commitment to the Gulf**

With the rise of nationalism around the world after the end of World War II in 1945, the UK faced problems in its colonies and in its informal empire (countries that were substantially under the UK's control). In particular, the UK's withdrawal from the Suez base in Egypt and the Suez Crisis that occurred immediately afterwards were remembered the failure of British diplomacy, in the sense that the UK had overestimated its own power and mistook US intentions. Since then, it has become a turning point to an era of declining military commitment to the so-called “East of Suez” areas. After the Suez Crisis, in 1957, the UK lost Malaya in Southeast Asia to independence and, furthermore, lost the presence of British forces in Iraq. Even in such a situation, when the Labour Party led by Harold Wilson came to power, it intended to continue military commitment to “East of Suez” and showed an emphasis on the British Empire and the Commonwealth.<sup>5</sup> However, the UK suffered from intermittent crises with the pound and from economic stagnation, and it became increasingly difficult to continue “East of Suez” military commitment. As a result, in 1968, Wilson officially announced the UK's withdrawal from “East of Suez.”

However, the UK did not completely stop its “East of Suez” military commitment, and aspects of its policy varied from region to region.<sup>6</sup> For example, the withdrawal was completed in Southeast Asia, leaving only Gurkhan soldiers in Brunei. Although the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) was concluded between the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Malaysia in 1971 and emphasized its commitment through consultation, it can be argued that the British military presence in Southeast Asia was lost substantially.

On the other hand, it can be pointed out that in the Gulf region, there has been a tendency to continue limited military commitment under Conservative governments. For example, there was a gap of nearly 10 years between the Labour government's decision to withdraw in 1968 and actual completion of the withdrawal in the latter half of the 1970s, the cause of which was the 1971-74 Conservative government led by Edward Heath that planned to maintain the British military presence both in the Gulf region and in Southeast Asia.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, when the Iran-Iraq War broke out in 1980, the UK, under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, dispatched the Armilla

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<sup>5</sup> Saki Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice Between Europe and the World?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 43-47.

<sup>6</sup> As for the process after the decision to withdraw from “East of Suez,” see “Empire Detained: Britain's Commitment outside Europe in Post-War British External Policy, 1968~82” by Masao Shinozaki (Yoshida Shoten, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-206.

Patrol naval vessels to ensure the safe navigation of commercial vessels. The Armilla Patrol also had the purpose of restraining the Soviet Navy, which at the time was strengthening its deployments in the Indian Ocean.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the UK continued to have limited military presence in some regions after withdrawing from “East of Suez.”

## **2 A Return to “East of Suez”? - British Commitment to the Indo-Pacific after the Cold War**

Post-Cold War British military commitment to the Gulf region has been strengthened, irrespective of Conservative or Labour governments. In the 1991 Gulf War, the UK conducted large-scale troop dispatches under the Conservative government from Thatcher to John Major, and the Afghanistan and Iraq War were carried out after September 11, 2001, under the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair. It is clear that the Gulf War, the Afghanistan and Iraq War were the largest scale deployments since the “East of Suez” withdrawal, and around 2009, the expression “East of Suez Revisited?” was already being used in some articles.<sup>9</sup>

However, it can be said that the revival of “East of Suez” as discourse in British security policy came from the 2010 Conservative government led by David Cameron. Shortly after taking office, Cameron’s Conservative Party launched the “Gulf Initiative” to promote cooperation with Gulf states in a broad range of political, economic, cultural, and security fields. Although only a small budget was allocated for this initiative, it was developed across ministries and was noted as a symbol of the UK’s commitment to the region through use of the initiative to support ministerial meetings and to support the advancement of British companies.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, defense cooperation with Gulf states, which was successively agreed to in 2012, is similarly a manifestation of the UK’s active stance towards the Gulf region.<sup>11</sup> First, a defense cooperation agreement between the UK and Bahrain was achieved in October and included training and capacity building to improve stability in the Gulf region, as well as the use of Bahrain’s bases by the UK.<sup>12</sup> Then, in November, a long-term defense partnership between the UK and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was announced, stipulating cooperation to increase British presence in the Gulf region in addition to defense industry cooperation and joint exercises between the UK and the UAE.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, in recent years, similar movements have expanded between the UK and the other Gulf countries.

Based on these agreements, the British presence in the Gulf region is expanding. For example, the Royal Air Force is deployed at Al Minhad Air Base in the UAE, Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, and Al

<sup>8</sup> Warren Chin, “Operations in a war zone: The Royal Navy in the Persian Gulf in the 1980s,” in Ian Speller (ed.), *The Royal Navy and Maritime Power in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 188.

<sup>9</sup> Aleksandra Dier, “British Defence Policy at a Cross-roads: East of Suez Revisited?” *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, No. 64 (CSS ETH Zurich, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *The UK’s relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain: Fifth Report of Session 2013-14* (November 2013), p. 3, p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> David B. Roberts, “British national interest in the Gulf: rediscovering a role?” *International Affairs*, Vol. 90, Issue 3 (May 2014), p. 669.

<sup>12</sup> Gareth Stansfield and Saul Kelly, “A Return to East of Suez? UK Military Deployment to the Gulf,” *Briefing Paper* (RUSI, April 2013), p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Moign Khawaja, “Britain, UAE enter defence partnership, discuss other deals,” *Arabian Gazette*, November 6, 2012.

Musannah Air Base in Oman.<sup>14</sup> Then, in 2018, the UK opened a permanent naval support facility in “East of Suez” for the first time in 50 years, at the Mina Salman naval base in Bahrain.<sup>15</sup> This is also the home port of the US Navy 5th Fleet, and British forces until now, including the Armilla Patrol, had operated with the support of US forces. Incidentally, the Armilla Patrol was mobilized for the Gulf War and the Iraq War after having its composition changed, and developed into Operation Kipion after 2011, which is currently on patrol duty in the Gulf region and the Indian Ocean.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, in 2018, a new permanent Joint Logistics Support Base was established in Duqm, Oman, and is positioned as an important “East of Suez” point outside the Persian Gulf.<sup>17</sup> In response to this kind of expansion of the British military’s presence in the Gulf region, “East of Suez” discourse began to be seen more often in the 2010s.

On the other hand, the presence of British forces in Southeast Asia is limited compared to the Gulf region, but gradual progress can be seen. Unlike the Middle East, the UK’s relationship with Southeast Asia, where British forces essentially lost their role, was revitalized around 2012 when Cameron declared the resumption of UK-Southeast Asian relations. In addition, the UK has strengthened economic and developmental relations with Southeast Asian countries and with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).<sup>18</sup> However, security-related developments from 2010-15 were limited. Of course, the UK’s commitment to Southeast Asia due to the FPDA was emphasized, but the reality was that when vessels were being dispatched for each case, they were for humanitarian assistance or for search and rescue. However, it can be argued that since 2018, the presence of British forces in Southeast Asia and in East Asia has been stepped up. This has also manifested in relatively long-term deployments, including joint exercises with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) and conducting freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, in line with those undertaken by US navy. Around this time, the UK declared a permanent increase in its presence in Southeast Asia, and in that case, the aforementioned deployment of British military assets in the Gulf region will serve as a model.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, the UK’s military commitment to the Gulf region can be said to have aspects of a return to the region, but at the same time, it also has aspects of strengthening existing relationships. On the other hand, with regards to Southeast Asia, the UK has lost its role in the region once already, but seems to be pursuing “military re-engagement,” in light of the growing importance of Asia, by taking a foothold in the framework built by the FPDA, and cooperating in economic and

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<sup>14</sup> Louisa Brooke-Holland, “UK forces in the Middle East region,” *Briefing Paper*, No. 8794 (House of Commons Library, January 2020), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> HM Government, “New Royal Navy Operations hub opens in Gulf,” April 5, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Claire Mills, “Operation Kipion: Royal Navy assets in the Persian Gulf,” *Briefing Paper*, No. 8628 (House of Commons Library, 2020), pp. 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> HM Government, “Defence Secretary strengthens ties between UK and Oman,” August 28, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Jürgen Haacke and John Harley Breen, “From Benign Neglect to Effective Re-engagement? Assessing British Strategizing and Policies towards Southeast Asia since 2010,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (December 2019), p. 330, p. 336.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Hope, “Britain to become ‘true global player’ post-Brexit with military bases in South East Asia and Caribbean, says Defence Secretary” *Telegraph*, December 30, 2018; Ian Storey, “The United Kingdom and Southeast Asia after Brexit,” *Perspective*, No. 33 (ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, April 2019), p. 6.

development issues. Currently, with a view towards increasing military commitment to the Gulf region and future military commitment to Southeast Asia, a debate has emerged on whether the more expansive “Indo-Pacific” should be used as an expression, instead of the “East of Suez” that is used to illustrate the recent cooperation with the Gulf region.<sup>20</sup>

### 3 Brexit and Global Britain – Churchill’s “Three Circles”?

British military commitment to the Indo-Pacific is referred to in the context of Brexit and Global Britain at times. The phrase ‘Global Britain’ was first mentioned in a 2016 speech by Theresa May, who said that “Brexit should not just prompt us to think about our new relationship with the European Union. It should make us think about our role in the wider world. It should make us think of Global Britain, a country with the self-confidence and the freedom to look beyond the continent of Europe and to the economic and diplomatic opportunities of the wider world.”<sup>21</sup> However, it has already been pointed out by many scholars that there is no clear definition or view of a Global Britain.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the UK government’s remarks acknowledge that it is struggling with the definition, and some prominent figures say that the concept will not contribute to resolving the problem of the UK’s post-Brexit role.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, those who see Brexit as an opportunity support Global Britain as an idea to avert Britain’s decline and they argue that, in that context, a strong commitment to the Indo-Pacific is needed.<sup>24</sup>

Discourse like this on Global Britain is also sometimes discussed in connection with the British exceptionalism which can be seen in Winston Churchill’s “Three Circles,” with the concept being derived from Churchill’s speech at the 1948 Annual Conservative Party Conference. In brief, there are “Three Circles” of (1) the Commonwealth and Empire, (2) the US (and the English-speaking world), and (3) United Europe and, when viewed as a Venn diagram, the UK is the center of the overlapping circles with the logic being to maintain international influence from that special and distinct position.<sup>25</sup> Although British policymakers recognized that the concept was no longer relevant when the UK’s decline became evident, the “Three Circles” is still nonetheless a basic concept that defines the image of postwar British diplomacy.

Of course, the UK did not maintain its involvement in all “Three Circles,” and the regions it prioritized changed over time. The withdrawal from “East of Suez” was a turning point. Not only did the UK essentially lose its role in “East of Suez” for financial reasons, but it also meant that the

<sup>20</sup> Alessio Patalano, “UK Defence from the ‘Far East’ to the ‘Indo-Pacific,’” (Policy Exchange, July 2019), pp. 6-8.

<sup>21</sup> “Britain after Brexit. A Vision of a Global Britain. May’s conference speech: full text,” *ConservativeHome*, October 2, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> For example, a United Nations Association – UK report points out that “there is still no clarity on what Global Britain might mean, even from a UK perspective.” Jess Gifkins, Samuel Jarvis and Jason Ralph, “Global Britain in the United Nations,” (UNA-UK, April 2019), p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Oliver Daddow, “GlobalBritain™: the discursive construction of Britain’s post-Brexit world role,” *Global Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (April 2019), p. 6; Peter Ricketts, “Why Brexit means diminished British weight in the world,” *Prospect*, May 6, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> John Hemmings, “Global Britain in the Indo-Pacific,” *Asia Studies Center Research Paper*, No. 2 (Henry Jackson Society, May 2018), pp. 21-31.

<sup>25</sup> Jamie Gaskarth, *British Foreign Policy*, (London: Polity, 2013), p. 66.

importance of Europe was relatively increased, as can be seen from the UK's 1973 membership in the European Community. The pivot was also influenced by the fact that the US had changed its stance towards clear support for European integration. Since then, the UK has turned its diplomacy to take balance between Europe and the US, and, as a result, the logic of the "Three Circles" no longer holds.<sup>26</sup>

However, with the UK leaving the EU, references to the "Three Circles" have become commonplace. For example, considering remarks from before and after the referendum by David Davis (who later became Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union) and Boris Johnson (current Prime Minister), they are conscious of the "Three Circles" with references to the Commonwealth, to the US, and to Global Britain.<sup>27</sup> However, although the US-UK "special relationship" is an existing framework and an immutable concept for Britain, there are some who say that, as "Circles," the Empire and the Commonwealth need to be revised as concepts. In other words, for countries and regions other than Europe and the US, it is necessary to consider other important bilateral and multilateral frameworks with the UK as a new "Circle," not just the Empire and Commonwealth.<sup>28</sup> As a reference, in 2017, then First Sea Lord Philip Jones asserted that there are "Three Circles" in maritime security. In other words, the UK, even in maritime security, should play a role in the "Three Circles" of (1) Europe (bilateral), (2) the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the US, and (3) the Gulf and Asia Pacific (Indo-Pacific).<sup>29</sup> As such, this paper will tentatively define the "Three Circles" as consisting of Europe, the US, and Indo-Pacific countries.

To be sure, on the economic front, the logic of the necessity for the post-Brexit UK to deepen relations with the US and Indo-Pacific countries may be true. However, in terms of security, the logic of the "Three Circles" does not always hold, and the reason is that there is no change to the major premise that NATO is critical to the UK's security even after Brexit. In the first place, the NATO factor was also the reason why the UK lost its "East of Suez" role during the Cold War. In other words, considering the UK's financial condition at the time, it was difficult to simultaneously maintain contributions to NATO, which is the primary actor in European defense, and to maintain the presence of British forces outside of Europe and, as a result of giving priority to NATO, the UK had no choice but to withdraw from "East of Suez."<sup>30</sup>

The stance of prioritizing contributions to NATO is similar to that of the current UK. Since the 1990s when the Cold War ended and the crisis on the European front subsided, global involvement of British forces has been seen, outside of NATO territories, in the context of crisis management and

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<sup>26</sup> Archil Chochia, David Ramiro Troitiño, Tanel Kerikmäe, Olga Shumilo and Nicole Lindstrom, "The First European Community and the British Position," in David Ramiro Troitiño, Tanel Kerikmäe and Archil Chochia (eds.), *Brexit: History, Reasoning and Perspectives* (Cham: Springer, 2018), p. 78.

<sup>27</sup> Pauline Schnapper, "British Foreign Policy in the Context of Brexit: Realism or Irrationality?" in Roberto Belloni, Vincent Della Sala and Paul Viotti (eds.), *Fear and Uncertainty in Europe: The Return to Realism?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 209.

<sup>28</sup> Robin Niblett, "Britain, Europe and the World Rethinking the UK's Circles of Influence," *Research Paper* (Chatham House, October 2015), p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> HM Government, "DSEI maritime conference 2017: Speech by Admiral Sir Philip Jones, First Sea Lord," September 11, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Shinozaki, *Empire Detained*, p. 206-207.

the war on terror. However, the UK's need for collective defense has increased since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The UK contributes to Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) on NATO's eastern flank, and also leads the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), a framework of the UK and the Northern Europe and Baltic countries that is expected to be mobilized for collective defense. In particular, when this JEF was first established in 2012, it was a unit focused on crisis management in the Middle East and in the Gulf region, which are "East of Suez," but following Russia's behavior in 2014, it is now mostly argued in the context of collective defense. For those reasons, there have been some questions raised about the ability to fulfill the UK's military commitment to the Indo-Pacific.<sup>31</sup>

Nonetheless, the UK is under pressure because of the need to also have security commitment to the Indo-Pacific. First, sea lane defense is a natural task for Britain, a maritime nation involved in the international economy through importing and exporting via sea lanes.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, for the UK there is no option not to engage militarily in areas that deepen economic involvement. The second is its relationship with the US. The US deploys operations both in the Gulf region and in Southeast Asia, and because of Brexit, there will be a relative increase in the UK's relationships with the US and with the Indo-Pacific, so it cannot be denied that "special relationships" are connoted in the logic of the UK deploying operations in the Persian Gulf and the South China Sea.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the UK is advancing commitment to the Indo-Pacific while being confronted with the ultimate question of how to align its economic "Three Circle" logic with its security "Three Circle" logic.

## Conclusion

This paper attempted to examine the logic behind the UK's recent policy towards and references to the Indo-Pacific by including the history on "East of Suez." On top of that, the UK's Indo-Pacific presence is gradually emerging, with the UK's relationship with Southeast Asia being newly restarted and slowly developing in addition to the Gulf region where relations with the UK have been strengthened since before the Brexit referendum.

It can be seen that this kind of security and military commitment to the Indo-Pacific has been consistently maintained and strengthened under Conservative governments, and maintaining relations with the Empire and the Commonwealth, which is equivalent to most of the current Indo-Pacific, should originally be a Conservative Party platform. In other words, Brexit now appears to be strengthening the UK's relationship with the Indo-Pacific, but to be more precise, strengthening the Indo-Pacific relationship was originally a characteristic of the Conservative party. It may just be

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<sup>31</sup> Nick Childs, "The Measure of Britain's New Maritime Ambition," *Survival*, Vol. 58, Issue 1 (February 2016), pp. 145-146; Nick Childs, "Hormuz Strait tensions highlight naval capability challenges," *IJSS Military Balance Blog*, August 27, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Geoffrey Till, "Britain Gambles with the Royal Navy," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Winter 2010), pp. 35-36.

<sup>33</sup> Gareth Stansfield, Doug Stokes and Saul Kelly, "UK Strategy in the Gulf and Middle East after American Retrenchment," *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Fall 2018), p. 241; Haacke and Harley Breen, "From Benign Neglect to Effective Re-engagement?" pp. 346-347.

that Brexit is making that current more intense.

In addition, it is necessary to separately consider economic involvement and military commitment when considering the Indo-Pacific relationships between the UK and the “Three Circles.” After Brexit, the logic of the UK’s strengthening economic involvement in the Indo-Pacific as a large-scale developing economy may hold. However, in military affairs, it remains unchanged that European defense through NATO is uniquely important to the UK. Of course, the need to strengthen security commitment to the defense of economically important sea lanes is clear and obvious, but it has been pointed out that the UK’s capacity to do so is insufficient. That means the UK is confronting the longstanding challenge of balancing NATO’s collective defense and its own expeditionary forces.

(March 23, 2020)

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