Britain and the Quadrilateral

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Abstract

The assumptions made about British involvement in the Indo-Pacific and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the "Quad") tend to rely on the constraints of geography rather than on interests in a rules-based system. This article argues that not only does Britain share interests with the Quad members in a free trading order—something that is threatened by Chinese and Russian policies —but it has also developed a set of capabilities and facilities across the region that give it reach. From the Persian Gulf and Oman, from Diego Garcia to Singapore, Britain's role in the Five Power Defence Arrangements and strategic relationships with regional powers mean that it is already an Indo-Pacific maritime power. Questions as to Britain's inclusion in the still-evolving Quad are therefore entirely political in our opinion. Given the openness of Japan and the United States to external members, Britain could make for an interesting and useful addition to the Quad in the years ahead.

Introduction

The current international order is in flux, and the international security environment has become considerably more unstable and threatening. The *Third Annual Report of the UK's National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence Review* cites the "resurgence of state-based threats and intensifying wider state competition and the attack on the rules-based international order, making it harder to build consensus and tackle global threats,"[1] while the United Kingdom's 2018 *National Security Capability Review* asserts that "as the world has become more uncertain and volatile, we [the UK] remain committed to deploying the full suite of our security, economic and influence capabilities to protect and promote our security, economic and influence interests."[2] A major cause of this deterioration in the strategic environment is the persistent, multifaceted, and incremental challenges posed by China and Russia to the global order and their efforts to divide and subvert the Western alliance—the United Kingdom, United States, and their allies—through influence operations and political warfare.[3] As the recently published UK Ministry of Defence's *Integrated Operating Concept* recognizes, the alliance is confronted by "adversaries [who] don't recognize the rule of law"[4] and who employ "an expanding, diverse and largely unregulated set of

information tools to influence target audiences' attitudes, beliefs and behavior . . . above and below the threshold of war."[5]

Before we show why the United Kingdom is likely to become more active in the Indo-Pacific in the years ahead, it is important—both for context and for the sake of our argument—to spend some time describing the nature of Russian and Chinese challenges to the maritime trading order (the "*mare liberum*"), because they directly impact states in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific.

Since the 1960s, when British strategists first conceptualized an "Indo-Pacific,"[6] and the end of the Cold War, the United Kingdom's interests and capabilities in the region have more waned than waxed, particularly after its decision to focus more on the Soviet threat in Western Europe.[7] The apparent disconnect between British capabilities and interests remains very much at the heart of the current debate as to whether Britain can and should become a partner or member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the "Quad"). In the wake of that decision taken in 1968, Britain's security posture as a Euro-Atlantic power was gradually solidified as forces were gradually withdrawn from the Indo-Pacific region. However, since at least 2013, there have been growing voices in London arguing that the time has come to rekindle a posture "east of Suez." That year, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)—Britain's oldest strategic policy think tank—published an essay entitled *A Return to East of Suez?* RUSI's director, Michael Clarke, asserted in the foreword: "It may not yet be declared government policy, but the UK appears to be approaching a decision point where a significant strategic reorientation of its defence and security towards the Gulf is both plausible and logical."[8] The report noted that new British facilities in the Gulf would allow the United Kingdom to deploy greater power into the region. Since then, the topic has remained an on-and-off again favorite of think tanks but only began to take shape when the United Kingdom started to recast its posture in the wake of Brexit. This article joins that pedigree and takes the argument into the thorny question of the United Kingdom's involvement or membership to the Quad.

This article focuses on these two aspects—interests and capabilities—and follows three lines of argument: first, that as China and Russia challenge the historic *mare liberum*, the United Kingdom—with its historic interest in unfettered maritime communication lines—has similar interests to the Quad's members. Second, that many of the assumptions made about the limits to a British role in the Indo-Pacific and in relation to the Quad are based on misconceptions or simplifications of interests and capabilities. We explore what some of those assumptions are and why Britain's interests and its capabilities make it a possible Quad partner, even a future member. The question, we assert is one of politics and one of prioritization. Third, we explore the capabilities the United Kingdom has in the region and how these

have expanded in recent years, noting the recent extension of Britain's geostrategic presence and ability to project power in the Indo-Pacific. We attempt to assess whether these will plateau, reduce, or continue rising and what this means for Britain's role in relation to the Quad.

The Challenges Posed by Russia and China to *Mare Liberum*

While each of the Quad members has different motives for being part of it, their common concern has been China's behavior in the maritime space, particularly in the South China Sea, where Beijing claims most of the sea's fisheries, energy resources, and international waters. In a 2019 report "The South China Sea: Why it Matters to Global Britain,"[9] we argued that China's unlawful and excessive claims in the South China Sea were both a threat to an open maritime order and to the UK's direct national interests—some 12% of British trade transits the waterway.[10] However, we would like to focus this first argument on something altogether grander, and that is the health of the global maritime system and how it aligns the Quad members with the United Kingdom's historic role as the guarantor of a "free and open" system. Indeed, the Royal Navy's primary role for much of Britain's history was to support the principle of *mare liberum*, or freedom of the seas, and this often forced British warships into conflict with states that sought to control or restrict shipping. In the case of China and Russia, this expansion of de facto sovereign control over what were once free seas and the jurisdictional claims that negate the historic principle of "innocent passage" are a direct threat to the maritime system as it has existed for some 300 years.

If we examine what China has done in the South China Sea, it becomes clear that China's Communist Party has sought to effectively extend its political remit over the maritime space, a policy the naval historian Andrew Lambert describes precisely as "continentalization."[11] China has asserted the right to demand other counties' vessels transiting areas of maritime space that it claims as its own territorial waters and exclusive economic zones gain advance permission.[12] This fundamentally threatens countries' right of innocent passage as guaranteed in Section 3, Article 17 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which China has ratified.[13] Furthermore, China has steadfast refused to utilize international law or the international courts to resolve the issue and has determined to confirm its interpretation through its own means—including through the implied use of force.[14]

Russia has adopted a similar approach. In March 2019, Moscow implemented a policy requiring foreign warships to give 45 days' advance notice to gain "permission" to transit the Northern Sea Route (NSR) in the Arctic, citing Article 234 of UNCLOS, which allows for special rules by coastal states in ice-covered regions to

protect the environment. Again, it has in effect threatened the right of innocent passage. In addition to this, Russia demands each vessel include its name, purpose, route, timetable, and technical specifications, a gross violation of the sovereign immunity enjoyed by warships at sea. This restriction also followed legislation in 2017 that restricted foreign commercial vessels from loading and unloading at ports along the NSR,[15] which is counter to Article 234's "nondiscriminatory" requirement. In the case of Chinese claims in the South China Sea and Russian claims in Arctic, it is apparent that both states are asserting—using the threat of military coercion[16]—massive extensions of sovereignty over international seas and over the rights of marine traffic, challenging the historic principle of *mare liberum* and specific codes of the UNCLOS, upon which that is based.

Testing Common Assumptions on the Quad's Membership and Interests

With regards to the Quad, a number of common assumptions are widely held: first, that the Quad is a geographically grounded grouping, with an explicit Indo-Pacific focus and identity. Second, that its four members are primarily interested in: the growth of China's military capabilities and bases; China's activities in the South China Sea; and the Chinese navy's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean. When it comes to assumptions about Britain in relation to the Indo-Pacific and Quad, the following are often cited: first, that Britain is far from the Indo-Pacific, the central interest point of the Quad, and therefore unlikely to partner with the grouping in a meaningful way. Second, that Britain is constrained by budgetary factors and lacks the regional footprint and therefore must prioritize closer to home in the Euro-Atlantic, and perhaps the Middle East. While we do not contest these assumptions entirely—they have traction—we do think they are open to alternative framing. Let us deal with them, one by one.

First, the argument that the Quad is geographically fixed or has a fixed membership is open to debate. If one considers the recent widening of its membership to a "Quad Plus" format, to seven countries,[17] it is apparent that the body is not yet fixed and remains in a highly fluid state, evolving and changing as the four nations decide the group's equities across a range of sectors. Nor is it clear that they hold a clear position on the inclusion of external powers, particularly other large powers with sovereign interests in the Indo-Pacific. At the most recent meeting in Tokyo in October 2020, Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo discussed the possibility of adding countries like the United Kingdom and France to the grouping. Motegi responded that it was "important to cooperate with as many nations as possible that share

these basic values and common rules."[18] Likewise, in his recent speech in London, Harsh Vardhan Shringla, the foreign secretary of India, praised the Netherlands, Germany, and France for their Indo-Pacific strategies and expressed hope that "the UK too will finalize its Indo-Pacific strategy."[19] Clearly, the participation of external powers in the Quad has not been ruled out. Thus, while we cannot argue that the United Kingdom has a right to be a Quad member, it is impossible to argue that its membership is unlikely or impossible. The decision is, we believe, ultimately a political one.

Second, the assumption that the Quad members' interests are narrowly defined by the Indo-Pacific region is worth exploring. To some extent, we agree that this is true but respond with two counterpoints. First, the Quad is interested in the maintenance of a free and open maritime space and sustainable development, areas where the United Kingdom has commitment and capacity (for example, its official development assistance (ODA) budget is one of the largest in the world).[20] Second, if one employs the Japanese and Indian geographical definitions of Indo-Pacific (i.e., to the shores of eastern Africa), then the United Kingdom is very much an Indo-Pacific power with interests and capabilities from the Persian Gulf, across the Indian Ocean Region, right through to Southeast Asia. It is also the leading party of the region's only multilateral security grouping—the Five Power Defence Arrangements, established in 1971 to underline British support for the security of the Malay Peninsula after the termination of the Anglo-Malayan Defence Agreement. When the geography of the Quad is considered in relation to this axis and in terms of Britain's support for the *mare liberum*, then the United Kingdom's inclusion is not only possible but also desirable. It is only when we think of the Quad as geographically focused around the area under the US Indo-Pacific Command ("from Hollywood to Bollywood"), that Britain's inclusion in the Indo-Pacific and as a Quad member looks peculiar; alternatively, when viewed through the prism of Britain's growing role in the Persian Gulf and broader Middle East, it looks more natural.

As a final argument, there have been at least two other regional organizations that have opened their membership to nonregional states. The first is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which Britain joined in 2015—though it was originally conceived as a region-only group to finance China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects.[21] The second is the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPATPP), another group with an ostensibly regional identity. Despite this, in October 2018, Japan signaled its willingness to include Britain in the grouping, to which the United Kingdom has also expressed interest.[22] Again, our point is not to say that Britain's potential membership within the Quad is likely or probable but instead to argue that its

involvement will be based on political factors and common interests and capability, not on geography.

Britain's Footprint in the Indo-Pacific

We will now discuss in greater depth the level of Britain's footprint in the Indo-Pacific to determine what the country could offer the Quad. While it is true that the British home islands are located thousands of kilometers away in the north Atlantic, the United Kingdom remains, by virtue of its overseas territories—Pitcairn in the Pacific and the British Indian Ocean Territory in the Indian Ocean—a "native" or "resident" power in the Indo-Pacific. Despite having deliberately "pivoted" away from the Indian and Pacific oceans during the second half of the twentieth century to deter the Soviet Union in the Euro-Atlantic region (as already discussed), Britain retained the military means to reach into the Indo-Pacific in the event of a strategic emergency. This was proven in the regional conflicts in the 1990s and 2000s in the Middle East—twice in Iraq and once in Afghanistan—where Britain deployed large numbers of armed forces. The Royal Navy also sent a large naval group—Taurus—to Singapore in 2009, to demonstrate its continued ability to project power further east and underscore Britain's continued commitment to the Five Power Defence Arrangements.

Britain's ability to project power has been predicated on a "geostrategic array" of military and logistical facilities that stretch from the Middle East to Southeast Asia.[23] These are linked by the strategically pivotal British Indian Ocean Territory, home of the giant UK–US naval, air, and space facility on Diego Garcia. These points allow British naval and air forces to access the region from the Mediterranean, not least via Britain's naval facilities at Gibraltar and the Royal Air Force's Akrotiri air station in the British Sovereign Base Areas on Cyprus. In addition, the United Kingdom has long operated military and logistical facilities in Kenya, Nepal, Singapore, and Brunei. In Kenya, the British Army has a training unit in Nanyuki, supported by smaller offices in Nairobi. In Kathmandu and Pokhara in Nepal, Britain operates facilities for the recruitment of the Ghurkas, while at Sembawang, in Singapore, it operates a refueling station for British and allied warships. And at Sittang Camp and the Medicina Lines, Brunei acts as host for the British Army's Jungle Warfare Training Division.

It is important to note that these British Indo-Pacific military facilities are *not* merely the relics of empire; instead, they form part of a dynamic geostrategic network that the United Kingdom has continued to modulate in accordance with evolving strategic requirements. Indeed, in keeping with the British government's announcement to refocus east of Suez after 2013, Britain's geostrategic network has grown in the western-most edge of the Indo-Pacific.[24] The Royal

Navy's shore facilities in Bahrain were upgraded between 2015 and 2018 to become a fully-fledged naval base—HMS Jufair—while a "defence hub" was established in 2017 in Duqm, Oman, to replenish and service British warships operating in the Indian Ocean, including the largest vessels, such as assault ships and aircraft carriers.[25] New British regional defense staffs—for the Middle East and Southeast Asia—were set up in 2016 in the United Arab Emirates and Singapore, respectively.[26] And in December 2018, Gavin Williamson, the then defence secretary, announced that the Ministry of Defence was investigating plans to transform Britain's logistical facility in Singapore to a naval base and/or open an entirely new one in Brunei.[27]

Besides acting as points to uphold Britain's sovereign claims and geostrategic presence in the Indo-Pacific, these military and logistical facilities also function to support the presence and reach of the British Armed Forces, particularly the Royal Navy. Already, in 2011, the Royal Navy had large naval and auxiliary ships on the scene after Typhoon Hainan to deliver disaster relief faster than many regional powers, including Australia and Japan.

In keeping with the United Kingdom's renewed focus east of Suez, this presence has also witnessed a considerable uptick in recent years as several Royal Navy vessels have been deployed to the region. In August 2018, HMS *Albion*—a large amphibious assault ship—steamed through the Paracel archipelago en route to Hanoi from Tokyo. At that point, the Royal Navy became the only navy, other than the US Navy, to directly challenge China's illegitimate maritime claims—in this case Beijing's imposition of so-called "straight baselines" around the Paracel Islands—in the South China Sea.[28] Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson promised that the increased presence would not be "a flash in the pan but actually a commitment to the region that goes forward over the coming years."[29] He was not joking. In 2020, the Royal Navy deployed six warships—supported by logistics vessels from the Royal Fleet Auxiliary—to the Middle East alone, building on a plethora of vessels fanning out across the Indo-Pacific the year before, some of which took part in naval drills with Japan and the United States.[30]

This rise in UK strategic activity is part of a wider—but often overlooked—British "tilt" toward the wider Indo-Pacific region, a policy that has been underway since at least 2012. That year, Britain signed a new defense treaty with Japan, followed a year later by one with Australia.[31] In 2014, the UK National Strategy of Maritime Security noted the importance of the South China Sea and linked Britain's maritime strategy with protecting "the rule of law and freedom of navigation and trade."[32] London followed through on this by signing a naval trilateral agreement between the Royal Navy, the US Navy, and the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Forces in 2016.[33] This resulted in trilateral antisubmarine exercises in

December 2018[34] and January 2019, followed by a US–UK exercise in the South China Sea shortly after.[35] Initially, much of this activity was an attempt to provide balance in relation to the government of David Cameron's geo-economically driven attempts to court China, a policy that has fallen flat given China's increasingly revisionist tone in recent years.

It has also been animated by Brexit, particularly as the government has sought to flesh out the concept of "Global Britain"—the slogan that was adopted after the referendum to account for the country's new post-EU international approach. Serving as foreign secretary in 2016, Boris Johnson explained at the Manama Dialogue that Britain's "policy of disengagement East of Suez" during the Cold War "was a mistake" and that "in so far as we are now capable, and we are capable of a lot, we want to reverse that policy." He went on to outline that the renewed British effort east of Suez would drum up sales for British manufacturers and service providers, contribute to regional peace, and ensure the United Kingdom remained "active in and deeply committed to the region."[36]

Since then, Britain has not only stepped up its diplomatic engagement east of Suez but has also begun to appraise its conceptual understanding of the region. In 2018, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office—now the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)—amplified its diplomatic presence in the South Pacific, a point British diplomats have been keen to trumpet.[37] Equally, joining Japan, India, Australia, the United States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and France, UK officials and political leaders have also begun to adopt the term "Indo-Pacific;" in 2020, for example, the FCDO established a new Indo-Pacific section, replacing the older section dealing with the "Asia-Pacific." In 2020, the United Kingdom has sought to deepen its relations with ASEAN, even applying for "Dialogue Partner" status, and Japan, through the signing of a Free Trade Agreement, which both countries are reported to see as the stepping-stone for Britain to join the CPA-TPP.[38]

Most importantly of all, just before winning the general election in December 2019, Boris Johnson, pledged to undertake a wide-ranging and integrated strategic review, which he promised would be "the deepest review of Britain's security, defence and foreign policy since the end of the Cold War."[39] He also stated that the review would look carefully at the significance of "shifts of power and wealth to Asia,"[40] a region, accordingly, the review is likely to place additional strategic emphasis on, to the extent that Britain may be about to tilt further into the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, Anne Marie Trevelyan, the former Secretary of State for International Development, who has worked on the review, explained at a side event at the Conservative Party's annual conference in September 2020 that the review would probably be maritime-centric and would involve the redistribution of British ODA

efforts to counter China's debt diplomacy and provide an alternative to the BRI, particularly in light of Beijing's response to COVID-19.[41]

At the time of writing, however, this national strategy will likely be delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is reported that the prime minister and the chancellor are unable to agree on the financial settlement for the new strategy, which is thought to demand an extra £15 billion in UK defense and foreign policy spending out to 2025.[42] In any case, in 2021, the British government has confirmed that the Royal Navy's new supercarrier—HMS *Queen Elizabeth*—will be deployed on its maiden operational tour with a full strike group to the Indian and Pacific oceans. However, in November the government announced a £16.5 billion increase in defense spending between 2021 and 2024, on top of an existing commitment to expand UK military expenditure at 0.5 percent above inflation over the same period. Moreover, the British government confirmed that the Royal Navy's new supercarrier—HMS *Queen Elizabeth*—would tour the Indo-Pacific with a full strike group.[43]

Conclusion

It is almost certain that Britain's presence in the Indo-Pacific will increase in the coming years. This was never dependent on the United Kingdom's membership of the EU; as we have shown, the British tilt toward the Indo-Pacific began long before the referendum of 2016 and has occurred across several planes. That said, the decision to leave the EU has amplified the United Kingdom's desire to branch out and consolidate its initial gains; the election of Boris Johnson as prime minister has only compounded that desire.

There are several forces drawing Britain further into the region:

1. Economic interests, particularly as the Indo-Pacific continues to grow in its position as the economic core of the world; in October 2020, it showed that by signing its first post-Brexit agreement—the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement—with Quad member, Japan. It is currently negotiating FTAs with Australia and the United States;

2. Geostrategic interests, in upholding British sovereignty over the British Overseas Territories and dissuading China's attempts to control the South China Sea and the maritime space, but also in terms of providing an alternative to Chinese economic coercion through the BRI;

3. Diplomatic interests, in providing support to close British allies, such as the United States, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, but also to increasingly close partners such as Japan, the ASEAN countries, and India; and

4. Humanitarian interests, in supporting democratic forces, reducing extreme poverty, and implementing policies designed to counter environmental degradation, whether in terms of greenhouse gas emissions or oceanic contamination.

It is hard to imagine that these forces will not continue to pull Britain into the Indo-Pacific in the years ahead.

However, due to the geographic location of the British home islands, the United Kingdom will always look at the Indo-Pacific as something of an outsider, despite its equitable claim—through its overseas territories—to be a native or resident power in the region. But this does not necessarily matter, not least because the Indo-Pacific is becoming increasingly woven into, and bound up, with other areas of the world. As countries in Europe, and then the Euro-Atlantic region, grew in organizational and economic power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they reached out and bound other regions into their internal affairs. In the twenty-first century, countries in the Indo-Pacific are doing the same: Japan, China, India, and the rest, are reaching out—albeit in different, often competing, ways—connecting themselves, and the region they inhabit, to the world beyond their shores. Consequently, Europe, Africa, and Asia are all bound increasingly together, giving fresh animation to Nicholas Spykman's "rimland" concept—the vast littoral space stretching around the southern underbelly of Eurasia, from the British Isles in Europe to Japan in the Pacific.[44]

Thus, insofar as Europe and Africa are now as much part of this broader strategic theater as the Indo-Pacific, Britain's presence, posture, and role in the Indo-Pacific cannot be seen in zero-sum terms. Its role in the Euro-Atlantic should not be seen in opposition to its role in the Indo-Pacific. Already, in their 2017 Joint Statement on Security Cooperation, Britain and Japan recognized this fact when they declared one another "to be the closest security partners respectively in Asia and Europe."[45] Consequently, British support for a free and open Indo-Pacific may come directly: through new military facilities, diplomatic posts, ODA, and the persistent, even permanent, deployment of Royal Navy warships—even integrated carrier strike groups, acting as the centerpieces for multinational naval cooperation. The Quad should welcome this input, even actively encourage it.

But the Quad should also recognize that British support for a free and open Indo-Pacific may also come indirectly, through the United Kingdom's role in the defense of the wider Euro-Atlantic region. Through so doing, Britain would free up US resources for deployment elsewhere, not least to the Pacific. Moreover, by dissuading potential, and deterring active, revisionists closer to home, the United Kingdom could assist with constraining China's westward geostrategic push, manifested today through the BRI, but likely tomorrow via a growing Chinese

military presence. Indeed, if primarily Euro-Atlantic powers like the United Kingdom (and France) have to adjust and tilt to new realities in the Indo-Pacific, Indo-Pacific powers—Japan, India, and Australia chief among them—will have to do the same in reverse.

But what of British cooperation with the Quad? Until recently, the Quad has been in its infancy. To fully mature, it will need to grasp, firstly, that it will need to expand and/or build partnerships with other countries, even those "external" to the region; and, secondly, that it cannot work in geographic isolation. Britain may never become a full member, rendering the Quad a Quint, but the country could become—based on its already-established relations with the United States, Japan, Australia and India—a key partner, insofar as it has much to offer in terms of capability, knowledge, and expertise. ✪

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