

Alexander Downer: A forward-thinking UK should shift the weight of its strategic policy towards the Indo-Pacific region

by Alexander Downer | November 24, 2020

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Anyone who thinks Brexit represents the UK retreating pathetically from the modern world into “splendid isolation” – and that this is how our departure from the EU is viewed by our international allies – should read *The New York Times* a bit less, and listen more to the voices of world leaders and friends of this country who say differently.



Three recent examples stand out for me. The first is Stephen Harper, former Canadian Prime Minister, Chairman of the International Democrat Union – an alliance of Conservative and right-leaning parties – and Chair of Policy Exchange’s Indo-Pacific Commission. Announcing the launch of that commission over the summer, he argued that the “declinist” view of the UK “flies in the face of much available evidence”, noting that “Britain remains the world’s fifth largest economic power, with a proud history as a seafaring, trading nation and a commercial network that has outlasted the Empire”. He is spot on.'

The second is Shinzo Abe, former Japanese Prime Minister, and the most significant Asian democratic politician of the post-war era. In the foreword to the [new report from](#)

[Policy Exchange's Indo-Pacific Commission](#), published on Monday, he says: “As a leading global power, Britain has a major role to play in the Indo-Pacific,” observing that “on the security front, the British military, and the Royal Navy in particular, will be a welcome presence in the seas of the Indo-Pacific.”

Third comes Scott Morrison, the Australian Prime Minister, who was awarded the inaugural Policy Exchange Grotius Prize, named in honour of the founding father of international law, on Monday. On the commission’s proposal for Britain to shift the weight of its strategic policy toward the Indo-Pacific, he said: “I couldn’t agree more and have conveyed the same to Boris. I endorse the report’s ‘new vision for a reinvigorated community of free and independent nations with one overriding goal in mind: to reinforce a sustainable rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region (IPR) that is resilient but adaptable to the great power realities of the 21st century.’”

There you have it. We’ve grown used, in recent decades, to gloomy domestic talk of Britain’s post-imperial decline but – as I have found in my own experience, as Australia’s Foreign Minister and latterly as the Australian High Commissioner in London – international perspectives tend to tip the scales the other way. The UK’s friends are united in their belief that there is an important role for this country to play and a whole world beyond Europe that wishes to give a very warm welcome.

Nowhere is that more true than the Indo-Pacific – home to some of the fastest-growing economies of the 21st century. Britain, out of national self-interest more than anything else, should be working hard to build new trading relationships here, backed up with diplomatic and military heft. It is a very positive sign that the first major free trade deal signed by UK Government was with Japan, the third largest economy in the world. As Liz Truss, the UK’s International Trade Secretary, recognised at the time, the deal was an important step towards joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, which would, she argued, “give UK business a gateway to the Asia-Pacific region and help to increase the resilience and diversity of our supply chains”. Policy Exchange’s Indo-Pacific Commission backs up that idea strongly, noting that it would link the UK to more than 13 per cent of global GDP and the world’s third-largest free trade area.

As the report also makes clear, there has been far too much focus in foreign policy circles over the last 30 years on the economic and military might of China, at the expense of the rest of the Indo-Pacific region. I firmly believe that China should be engaged with, rather than contained, and that its importance to the world’s economy has only been underlined in the past year as we have battled a pandemic that emerged in Wuhan and led to a global economic shutdown.

However, even in a year such as the one we have had, it is vital to note the huge economic transformation that has been going on in China in recent decades is part of a wider regional trend driven by other economic powerhouses, including Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, India the Association of South East Asian Nations, and Australia.

Of course, Britain cannot overplay its hand in the region as it seeks to play a greater role in what used to be called “east of Suez” in colonial times. Wisely, the emphasis in the Commission’s report – contributed to by key political and diplomatic thinkers in countries from New Zealand to Sri Lanka – is not on the UK acting as a “leader” in the Indo-Pacific, but rather as an “enabler” and facilitator for others in the region, which should take the lead.

This will apply in particular to one of the most attractive ideas in the report – a new Indo-Pacific Charter, which would in effect be a clear set of mutually shared aspirations for the future of Indo-Pacific relations that other major global players like the UK, and the US – which has a greater military and diplomatic presence there than any other foreign power – can support.

This charter could be as significant in the 21st century as the Atlantic Charter, signed by Churchill and Roosevelt in 1941, was in the 20th century. Suggested principles include no nation being “prevented by any other from free and full access to the high seas/global commons of the Indo-Pacific, for any peaceful purposes, including trade”. Without basic rules such as this, the region clearly will struggle to prosper.

There can be no forcing or co-opting of independent sovereign nations into submitting to such principles. But the idea, as Morrison observed in his brilliant speech accepting the Grotius Prize, is instead nations “freely submitting to such rules” around economic, security and global environmental issues “because it is in their broader national interest to do so”.

It will be in Britain’s national interest to engage more fully in the future in a prosperous Indo-Pacific. Likewise, as we have seen with Policy Exchange’s Indo-Pacific Commission report and the warm response to it, nations in the region see it as in their national interest to welcome the UK with open arms.

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