

# The Telegraph

## Britain has a critical role 'East of Suez' in the Indo-Pacific century

The UK can act as a bridge between democratic allies in the region, and protect the rules-based order

by Stephen Harper | 20 July 2020



How should the UK and its allies adapt to the Indo-Pacific century, as [China grows more powerful](#) in economic and military terms? Last week's decision by the British Government to block Huawei's involvement in 5G has proven that it is far from a straightforward question. But the answer must always be to stick firmly to constitutional principles.

Having carefully re-considered legitimate questions about connectivity and costs in light of recent events, the UK [acted wisely](#). It heeded the concerns of its closest allies, including the US and Australia. Even if different directions are chosen on specific issues, Britain and its allies must work together as much as possible to preserve the rules-based order on questions of economics, defence and security in the region.

What next for countries like Britain and my own, Canada, in the Indo-Pacific century? First, we must avoid a China-centric view. That would cater to the more concerning aspects of Beijing's own ambitions. But it would also overlook the myriad opportunities in one of the fastest-growing regions, where strong and independent nations [form a geopolitical triangle](#) stretching from India to Japan and reaching down to Australia. Policy Exchange's new Indo-Pacific Commission – which I am proud to have been asked to chair – recognises that countries including Japan, India, South Korea, Australia, Indonesia and Singapore have much to offer us by way of mutual trade and co-operation on political, defence and diplomatic issues.

Too often the UK has shied away from such bold thinking, with many assuming that – particularly since it withdrew from “East of Suez” – Britain's time as a global power was over. Of course, we do live in a different world now. The countries in the Indo-Pacific are growing more prosperous by the decade and moving up the production value-chain. But this “declinist” view of the UK flies in the face of much available evidence.

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. It is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, retaining naval bases on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, in Singapore, and defence arrangements with Singapore, India, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. It is no surprise that officials are debating whether to base one of Britain's new aircraft carriers in the Far East, where it is expected to conduct military activities with allies including the United States and Japan.

There thus remains a strong, modern case for Britain playing a key role in the Indo-Pacific alongside its partners, building on arrangements such as the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance, which includes Australia and New Zealand. Perhaps most importantly, Britain can position itself as a constructive intermediary in the region in a way that other countries – like the US, the indispensable superpower – cannot, being hampered by other diplomatic considerations and a complicated history. Britain does not, for example, present the risk of overshadowing the interests and visibility of local allies.

Indeed, there may even be room here for a more significant role. The UK has been a “bridge” in Nato between Washington and Europe for decades, helping to maintain essential relationships by fostering trust and building consensus. It could – with a diplomatic effort – seek to reprise that role in an Indo-Pacific context, contributing to an alignment of independent nation-states and democracies in the region.

As a former prime minister, I also note a timely ingredient for a special British initiative in the Indo-Pacific – the Johnson ministry's powerful majority in the Commons,

effectively locked in until 2024. The Government, with its attractive [global Britain](#) agenda, can make international commitments and has the time to deliver on them politically. There is no doubt in my mind that the Prime Minister has rediscovered his country's international vocation and wants Britain to assume a much greater role in global affairs than has been the case in many years. Its allies around the world, especially in the Indo-Pacific, have much to gain from this.

***Stephen Harper is a former Prime Minister of Canada and chairs Policy Exchange's Indo-Pacific Commission***