



2020_07_29_Britain turns to Nahdlatul Ulama to help formulate a new Indo-Pacific strategy

“South and Southeast Asia are poised to emerge as independent pillars of support for the rules-based international order”

LONDON, United Kingdom, July 29, 2020: KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf—General Secretary of the world’s largest Muslim organization—has joined a high-profile international commission dedicated to forging “a new approach” to the Indo-Pacific as Britain seeks to place this strategically vital region at the center of its pursuit of a renewed global role in the wake of its exit from the European Union (Brexit).

Newly established by the most influential think tank in the United Kingdom, Policy Exchange, the Indo-Pacific Commission is led by former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who [recognizes](#) the formative effect its recommendations are likely to have upon British foreign policy. Writing in *The Telegraph*—a prominent British newspaper with close links to that country’s governing Conservative Party—Harper said:

“As a former prime minister, I... 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.”

Among the Commission’s [16 members](#) are highly influential figures from within the U.S. foreign policy establishment, including Ely Ratner, the former Deputy National Security Advisor to then Vice President Joe Biden and Nadia Schadlow, former U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor and the author of America’s current National Security Strategy, which sets the superpower’s strategic priorities in the areas of defense and foreign affairs. A number of preeminent current and former British officials also sit on the Commission, including former UK Defense Secretary Sir Michael Fallon and Claire Coutinho MP—the Parliamentary Private Secretary to Chancellor Rishi Sunak, the most powerful member of Boris Johnson’s administration after the Prime Minister himself.

Writing in renowned British daily newspaper *The Times*, Mrs. Coutinho hailed the Commission, [highlighting](#) the centrality of the Indo-Pacific to the UK’s post-Brexit “Global Britain” agenda and stressing the indispensable role Indo-Pacific powers must play if a rules-based international order is to survive in the 21st century:

“[T]o truly shore up our rules-based global system and protect our values of free trade and democracy, we must also move swiftly to deepen our relationships with our partners in the Indo-Pacific... Greater engagement with the Indo-Pacific is essential as we forge an independent future... these two great spheres of innovation, Global Britain and the Indo-Pacific, can be [transformative] when we come together.”

U.S. and UK members of the Commission serve alongside statesmen and policymakers from Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, India, Australia and New Zealand, including former New Zealand Foreign Minister Murray McCully and former Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer. In a July 15, 2020 [article](#) in the *Spectator*, Downer underscored the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific in determining the future shape of international relations, strongly arguing that Britain “should stand up for what it believes is right [in the Indo-Pacific]: the rules-based international system and the UK’s liberal democratic values.”

[Leaders](#) of the global [Humanitarian Islam](#) movement have long acknowledged the West’s vital role in enshrining the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* at the heart of the rules-based post-WWII international order. Working across political, ethnic and religious divides on the basis of a shared respect for human dignity, founders of the Humanitarian Islam movement aim to “re-awaken” a kindred set of values rooted in the ancient spiritual traditions of South and Southeast Asia, including Islam. This global movement is inspired by the transformational legacy of Indonesia’s first democratically elected head of state and former NU Chairman H.E. KH. Abdurrahman Wahid (“[Gus Dur](#),” 1940 – 2009), who advocated marshalling the concentrated energies of the West to help bring Islamic teachings into alignment with the modern world of freedom, democracy and human rights.

To this end, in 2018 Mr. Staquf secured the accession of Indonesia’s largest Islamic political party (PKB) to full membership in Centrist Democrat International (CDI), a coalition of over 100 mainly Christian democratic parties from across the globe, including the largest and most influential political party in the European Union, the European People’s Party (EPP). CDI’s Executive Committee has since unanimously adopted three distinct PKB resolutions that [endorse](#) the Humanitarian Islam movement’s [foundational texts](#), [affirm](#) that “Western humanism, Christian democracy and Humanitarian Islam are kindred traditions,” and [call](#) for “[a 21st century alliance](#) to promote a rules-based international order founded upon universal ethics and humanitarian values.”

News of Mr. Staquf’s membership in the Indo-Pacific Commission sparked viral coverage in print, internet and social media across Indonesia’s vast archipelago. *Times Indonesia* [analyzed](#) the importance of the appointment as follows:

“According to PKB Chairman H. Muhaimin Iskandar, Mr. Staquf’s appointment to the Commission represents a significant development in his role as PKB Emissary to CDI, the largest international political coalition on earth, with over 100 affiliated parties in 70 nations...

“It should be noted that Stephen Harper, the Chair of the Commission, is also the Chairman of IDU (International Democrat Union), the world’s second largest political network, with 73 member parties from 63 nations...

“Yahya Cholil Staquf himself has said he was willing to accept the appointment because he views it as tremendous opportunity to strategically position the global Humanitarian Islam movement, which he has headed for the past four years.”

In [comments](#) carried by Indonesia’s second-largest newspaper, *Jawa Pos*, H. Muhaimin Iskandar said:

“This is a highly strategic opportunity. Mr. Staquf is in a position to help shape Britain's long-term policy towards the Indo-Pacific region. Given the traditional ‘special relationship’ between Britain and the United States, we hope to see the policies of these two powerful nations consolidated into a single wise approach.”

Mr. Iskandar has previously articulated Nahdlatul Ulama’s vision for Indonesia’s global role in a keynote [speech](#) delivered to the CDI Executive Committee and other assembled dignitaries—including the Secretary General of India’s governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Indonesian Vice President KH. Ma’ruf Amin—at the [CDI Eurasia Forum](#) held on January 24, 2020, in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

On July 2, 2020, *Strategic Review: The Indonesian Journal of Leadership, Policy and World Affairs* published an adapted version of Mr. Iskandar’s speech as part of a [twin-feature lead story](#) alongside an in-depth analysis co-authored by Religious Freedom Institute’s Vice President for Strategy and International Research, [Dr. Timothy S. Shah](#) and Thomas Dinham, the UK-based Director of Strategic Outreach for Bayt ar-Rahmah, a hub for the worldwide expansion of NU operations. In that piece, titled “Humanitarian Islam: Fostering shared civilizational values to revitalize a rules-based international order,” Shah and Dinham observe:

“Building on their transformative work in support of religious pluralism in Indonesia and the global Humanitarian Islam movement, NU spiritual leaders are seeking to mobilize like-minded religious and political figures throughout South and Southeast Asia to foster a renewed appreciation for the spirituality and respect for pluralism that were once defining features of the Indianized cultural sphere [“Indosphere”], and forge concrete avenues of cooperation between profoundly spiritual and humanitarian expressions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Their explicit goal is for South and Southeast Asia to re-emerge as a cohesive, vital and proactive civilizational sphere, which functions as a powerful, independent pillar of support for a rules-based international order founded upon shared civilizational values...

“This global movement... seeks to ‘abolish the primordial cycle of hatred, tyranny and violence that has plagued humanity since time immemorial’; derail the juggernaut of ‘tribal’ politics, whether rooted in ethnic, religious or secular/ideological identities; shift the focal point of authority in the Islamic world from the Middle East to South and Southeast Asia, where a majority of the world’s Muslims reside; and re-enliven the profound civilizational values of the Indosphere, in order to buttress the rules-based post-WWII international order as the world’s geopolitical center of gravity shifts from the North Atlantic axis into the heart of Eurasia.”