



# Global Britain: A Pacific Presence?

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Several developments over the last month suggest that the UK is moving to establish its strongest military presence in the Western Pacific since its 1971 [withdrawal of forces](#) from Singapore. Drivers include the quest for post-Brexit trade and arms supply deals, the imperative to use the Royal Navy's new aircraft carriers to promote a strong Global Britain brand, and a growing alignment with US regional objectives and alliances. The risks attending this new era of British maritime power include entanglement in a potentially very hot Korea-US conflict as well as a creeping cold war between the UK's two preeminent non-EU commercial partners, the US and China.

### Drivers of engagement

Most acute among recent developments is the disturbingly rapid and risky escalation of the North Korean nuclear weapons and ballistic missile testing programme and accompanying rhetoric between Pyongyang and Washington. As Malcolm Chalmers has [pointed out](#), if the US is, however ill-advisedly, to pursue disarmament of North Korea via overwhelming force, it may well act very suddenly and London may have just hours to decide if and how it is to support such operations. The late August [deployment](#) of around 30 UK troops and the Commander of Joint Forces, General Sir Chris Deverell, to participate in the US-South Korean [Ulchi Freedom Guardian](#) exercise suggests that at least some form of planning for UK military support to the South is underway.

The second development was the 10 September [intervention](#) by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg that the Euro-Atlantic security organisation was part of the global response to North Korea's "reckless behaviour". While he refused to confirm that an attack on Guam, a heavily militarised [US territory](#) in

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the Western Pacific, would trigger NATO's [Article 5](#) collective defence obligations, neither did he give the normal legal interpretation of the [North Atlantic Treaty's](#) subsequent article: that, as with the Falkland Islands, territories or colonies outside Europe and North America are specifically excluded from collective defence guarantees.

In parallel to the more pressing implications of the Korean crisis is the sustained use of the UK's "security surplus" as a bargaining tool towards post-Brexit trade deals with Japan and South Korea. Theresa May has made British military capabilities integral to both her recent trips to Japan. [RAF Typhoon](#) fighter aircraft accompanied her to exercise with their Japanese, [Korean](#) and locally based US counterparts late last year. Inspecting the Japanese helicopter carrier *Izumo* in late August, she talked up Anglo-Japanese defence cooperation. The frigate [HMS Argyll](#) will visit the Pacific for the Navy's first ever bilateral exercises with the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force next year. Such British deployments to North East Asia are unprecedented since the 1950s Korean War.

The fourth notable development is the evolution or elucidation of plans for redeployment of the Royal Navy in line with the introduction of its new supercarriers and the formalisation of plans to build a new range of light frigates, the [Type-31e](#). Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson [pledged](#) in Australia in late July this year that one of the first tasks of the new carriers would be to conduct freedom of navigation operations around Chinese-built islands in the South China Sea. Although [HMS Queen Elizabeth](#) won't be fully operational until [at least 2021](#) – and then largely flying US Marine Corps strike aircraft – this does give some indication of the thinking around their future use for global power projection.

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## “It’s presence that really counts”

Speaking in London at the Defence and Security Equipment International arms fair on 11 September, First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Philip Jones reiterated the Royal Navy’s “strategic ambition” to re-establish a presence in the Western Pacific. Leveraging Theresa May’s regional diplomacy, the current defence strategy’s (SDSR 2015) focus on building British prosperity, and the new export-focused [National Shipbuilding Strategy](#), he stated that, “if the UK does wish to forge new global trading partnerships, [the Asia-Pacific region] is somewhere we need to be.” Marketing the new [Type-26 Global Combat Ship](#) and Type-31e frigates to regional navies is just part of that ambition.

Sir Philip reminded his audience that the Royal Navy retains berthing rights in Singapore and speculated on basing some of the new Type-31e frigates there in future. Host to a newly established [British Defence Staff](#), Singapore, like Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand, is the UK’s treaty ally in the region. The [Five Power Defence Arrangements](#) (FPDA) have bound these Commonwealth states since 1971, when the UK’s standing regional military deployments ended. Such commitments once included a major counter-insurgency operation in Malaysia, nuclear-armed Vulcan bombers in Singapore, and, until the 1997 handover of Hong Kong, a significant Royal Navy presence in the South China Sea. The mainly Gurka-manned [Brunei Garrison](#) is the last vestige of this imperial presence.

Reasserting the FPDA and a presence in Singapore is an important pillar of Whitehall’s strategy to re-establish the UK as a major trading partner in the East. As with closer defence relations with Japan and South Korea, the SDSR made this overt in late 2015 but Brexit has rapidly increased the tempo of eastward defence diplomacy.

## Strategic questions

Several important questions arise from the growing commitment of British military power east of Malacca and must inform any strategy for promoting British interests and influence in Asia.

Firstly, who would a reinforced UK presence in East Asia be envisaged to counter? North Korea is the most obvious answer, although the UK is not treaty-bound to protect any of that country's near neighbours. Originally intended as a deterrent to Indonesian expansionism, the FPDA will henceforth find itself increasingly enmeshed in strategies to contain Chinese power projection into the South China Sea and beyond. Japan equally feels pressured by Chinese claims to islands in the East China Sea.

The second question is, then, what UK forces could reasonably be expected to do once projected to East Asia other than promote British defence contractors. Given time and the availability of half the active fleet, a carrier battle group could make it to the Straits via the new [UK Joint Logistics Support Base](#) at Duqm, Oman. Depending on other commitments, a squadron or so of Typhoon fighters could deploy much faster to ready bases in Malaysia and Singapore. But what then?

Unlike in Europe and the Middle East, there is little prospect of brigade or division-size formations of land forces accompanying air and naval forces. China has far larger forces, shorter supply lines and advanced defensive technologies. As the Commons Defence Committee [heard](#) this month, the new carriers are unlikely to be able to operate within range of China, let alone the envisaged Type-31e vessels. The spectre of both the UK's doomed inter-

war [Singapore Strategy](#) and of the Imperial Russian Navy in 1905 ought to loom large in this scenario.

Any war on the Korean peninsula would likely be short and very, very sharp. North Korean air and naval surface forces would probably be irrelevant but the British Army has negligible capacity to counter the massive Korean People's Army. At best, given an unlikely lead-in time, the UK might contribute to anti-submarine or mine clearance operations around Japan. Yet these are exactly the roles that the larger Japanese navy already excels at.

Both China and North Korea are, of course, nuclear-armed states and the risk of escalation to a nuclear exchange is real. It is unlikely but not unthinkable that, in the event of a North Korean nuclear attack on US territory, the UK could be asked by the US to contribute to a nuclear response. It is worth remembering that our own ballistic missile-carrying submarines are, at short notice, the only British weapons system within range of Korea.

## **Partners of choice**

The final question is, then: to what extent is UK presence predicated on US demands and regional strategy? The existing special relationship is naturally far more important to Mrs May than any speculative relationships in Asia. The Trump administration has [talked sweetly](#) of prioritising its own trade deal with the UK, but it is apparent that it expects a quid pro quo from its only globally capable security partner. With containing North Korea and China the top priority for Washington, it is possible that this bargain may involve the UK burden-sharing to some extent in Asia-Pacific.

At present, the UK offers established defence relationships with US allies Australia, New Zealand and Singapore, as well as Malaysia and Brunei, but little

in the way of regional capability. That would of course change with the advent of carrier battle groups in the 2020s. Highly vulnerable on their own, these could nevertheless be attractive assets to US-led forces in the kind of [lengthy confrontation](#) with China that the US appears to be preparing for. As the First Sea Lord [put it](#), “Having invested so much practical and political capital in [development of British carrier strike capacity], our American friends will be watching closely to see if the UK is serious about remaining their partner of choice.”

Notwithstanding this month’s [government paper](#) committing to defence cooperation with the EU after Brexit, the gist of recent pronouncements is that Global Britain’s post-Brexit identity is a return to [neo-mercantilist maritime control](#). In strategic terms, this fits with the “[strategic raiding](#)” focus of SDSR 2015 and investment in the Royal Navy as well as the light footprint, pivot to Asia thinking of both post-Bush US administrations. In short: if Britannia no longer rules the waves, the Anglosphere is set to do so well into this century.

The logical trajectory of this strategy is an alliance structure that reflects the resurrected Global British presence, perhaps by joining up the Anglosphere alliances ([Five Eyes](#), [ANZUS](#), [FPDA](#), and to some extent NATO) with Japan, South Korea and perhaps even India. Next month’s Japanese election is all about unblocking [constitutional reform](#) to permit “collective defence” alliances in the face of growing pressure from North Korea and China.

Call it an Alliance of Maritime Democracies to uphold the [rules-based global order](#), Global NATO or, more bluntly, a strategy to contain rising China, there is a direct collision between coherence with US Pacific strategy and the pre-Brexit strategy to court Chinese trade and investment. Other than for the [G20 Hangzhou Summit](#) last year, Mrs May has yet to visit China. A close second to

the US as the UK's leading non-EU commercial partner, China (with Hong Kong) accounts for over half of British trade with East Asia. After three visits to China by David Cameron, this omission is perhaps the most telling element of the expansion of Global Britain's rethought Pacific partnerships.

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### ***About the Author***

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