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英國「向印太傾斜」戰略：公共政策發展、戰略意圖、 及政策框架

黃伯農*

摘要

2023年3月，英國首相辛偉誠（2022-今）出版題為《綜合評估刷新 2023：應對競爭更激烈和動盪的世界》的政策文件。這文件其實是 2021 年 3 月前首相約翰遜（2019-2022）出版首份脫歐後官方國際政策文件《競爭時代的全球英國：安全、國防、發展和外交政策的綜合回顧》的修訂版。本文旨在將這兩份英國政策文件進行處境性分析，以美國與中國競爭為大背景，從而鑒定英國政圈、公共政策圈、和國際社會內有關的事件和討論。本文也研判英國政府是否與美國拜登政府在印度－太平洋區域圍堵中國的政策對齊。最後，根據 2021 年 3 月到 2023 年 3 月間被挑選英國學者的有關討論，本文將勾勒出英國政府對印太區及中國的可能政策框架。

關鍵詞：英國國家經濟安全、英國國際政策、英國與中國關係、向印太傾斜

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The United Kingdom's "Tilt towards the Indo-Pacific" Strategy: Public Policy Development, Strategic Intents, and Policy Framework

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Abstract

In mid-March 2023, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (2022-present) published the policy research paper, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World*. This was actually the revised version of the first official post-Brexit international policy paper published in March 2021 by former Prime Minister Boris Johnson (2019-2022), *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. This paper aims to contextualize the related British policy discussions against the larger U.S.-China rivalrous context by identifying the relevant events and discussions within the British public policy and political circles as well as international community. It also assesses the British government's intention by asking whether London aims to align with the Biden administration to contain China in the Indo-Pacific or not. Finally, drawing from British academic discussions taken place between March 2021 and March 2023, it will outline the British government's possible Indo-Pacific and China policy framework.

Keywords: British national economic security, British international policy, U.K.-China relations, tilt towards Indo-Pacific

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Introduction

On 13th March 2023, the United Kingdom's (U.K.) Prime Minister Rishi Sunak published his policy paper – *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World*. In his paper, Sunak identified “China under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)” posed “epoch-defining and systemic challenge” in “almost every aspect of [British] national life and government policy”. He then continued by stating that the U.K.’s response to this challenge was to include “a new focus on tackling state threats to the U.K.’s democracy, economy and society, and protecting our science and technological base” (His Majesty Government, 2023). Just a day afterward, on 14th March 2023, the Chinese ambassador to the U.K. – Zheng Zeguang, publicly responded to the Sunak paper that “China is an epoch-defining opportunity, not a challenge” (Chinese Embassy in U.K., 2023).

Whereas the U.K. framed the communist China as both a great systemic challenge and an all-penetrating state-based threat, instead of framing the U.K. as also a challenge and threat, the Chinese government’s spokesperson chose to position China as an opportunity of international cooperation and mutual benefits. Yet this peculiar, if not mismatching way of U.K.-China dialogue was not new, which could at least be traced back to March 2021 when the Sunak paper’s predecessor was first published.

In mid-March 2021, the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson officially released the policy document – *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (hereafter the “*Integrated Review*”), which was the very first one that took a relatively comprehensive and integrative look into the United Kingdom’s (U.K.) defense, security and foreign policies since “Brexit”¹ was formally in effect on 1st January 2021 (Her Majesty Government, 2021).

In July 2021, resultant of the increasing pressures from the Trump administration of the United States (U.S.), the Johnson government made a U-turn from his previous decision made in the early 2021 in adopting the Chinese technology giant Huawei’s 5G technology in the U.K. Since then, East Asian public opinions, scholars and think tanks especially those in China were particularly concerned if the U.K.’s policy “tilt towards the Indo-Pacific region” would also mean that London would work with Washington and allies to contain China in the Indo-Pacific (Global Times, 2020; Zhang, 2021).

For examples, by late 2020, the Chinese Communist Party’s English language mouthpiece *Global Times* criticized the U.K.’s “tilt towards the Indo-Pacific” strategy was both distractive and unable to stabilize the post-Brexit national economy (Global Times, 2020). In January 2021, Zhang Bei (2021) of the Chinese government’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs think tank – China Institute of International Studies, suggested that as an adjustment of the “Global Britain” strategy, the U.K.’s “tilt towards the Indo-Pacific” strategy was in continuation of the general trend of the post-Brexit Britain’s economic, trade and military shift towards the East. It also reflected the Conservative Party’s increasingly tough policy stance to China. Because both *Global Times* and Zhang Bei used the geopolitical term “pivot

¹ “Brexit” refers to the series of events which led to the formal withdrawal of the U.K. from the European Union (E.U.) on 31st January 2020.

to Indo-Pacific" to describe and make sense of the U.K.'s "tilt towards the Indo-Pacific" strategy, their views were representative of a policy consensus in China: the U.K. seeks to collaborate with the U.S. to contain China in the Indo-Pacific.

Nonetheless, when the *"Integrated Review"* was published, the Chargé d'Affaires Minister Yang Xiaoguang of the Chinese embassy in London indicated in a television interview broadcasted by Sky News, that China was neither the U.K.'s 'competitor' nor "systemic competitor", but a cooperative partner. Yang also suggested that although there were differences between Chinese and British political and social systems, they should neither obstruct bilateral cooperation, nor encourage confrontation. Yang further criticized certain unnamed great-power (i.e. the U.S.) sowed divisions among countries by reframing the Asia-Pacific region as "Indo-Pacific", whose real intention was questionable. Yang therefore expressed his hope that the U.K. would be able to contribute to the peace and stability of the region (Chinese Embassy in U.K., 2021; 中國駐英國大使館, 2021).

Did the Johnson and Sunak governments intend to contain China with the U.S.? The following pages have two main objectives. In the first place, in order to survey the strategic landscape-context wherein the *"Integrated Review"* was written, this paper will trace the relevant discussions and analyses surrounding "tilt towards the Indo-Pacific" published by the British think tanks, political circle and academics. Secondly, this paper will analyze the factors, intentions and considerations of the Johnson government's proposed tilt towards the Indo-Pacific.

The concept "pivot" has a strong geopolitical bearing of containment, which is conceptually traced back to the works of British and American geo-politicians Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman (Wong, 2018, Chapter 3), whereas the carefully chosen word "tilt" does not entail. I therefore argue that the British government's Indo-Pacific strategy deliberately did not use the word "pivot" was to avoid such reading of geopolitical containment. For the U.K. to tilt towards the Indo-Pacific, it would mean to strengthen the U.K.'s engagement with the countries in the Asia-Pacific region and to protect existing British interests in the region. Instead of working with the U.S. to contain China, Johnson and Sunak sought to "tilt" – which means to refocus and re-balance China's increasing influence in the Asia-Pacific region – for defending British national interests.

Striking a delicate balance between the U.K.'s economic and trade relations with China and deterring China's state-based threats is therefore necessitated. Drawing from a selection of British scholars' discussions between March 2021 and March 2023, I shall then identify and elaborate a possible China policy framework for the British government, which is intended to achieve the seemingly contradictory goals of collaborating with and deterring China concomitantly, for protecting and advancing British economic security.

Boris Johnson's Swing-to-Balance China Approach

According to the British government's statistics for the second quarter of 2020, China became the U.K.'s largest importer in the world, which was of goods valued a total of GBP£11 billion. Percentage of Chinese imports to the U.K. increased from the first quarter's 8.6% to the second quarter's 13.4%. This was the first time in British international trade

history when China was the U.K.'s largest importer (Wintour, 2021a). How important was China to the British economy? In September 2022, the British scholar and former chief economist at the U.K. government's Department of International Development – Alan Winters (2022), positioned China as the U.K.'s third largest trading partner, followed by the E.U. and U.S.

Despite China's importance to the U.K. economy and trade, the British public perceived China as a threat. In mid-February 2021, British think tank released poll results, which indicated that a majority of the U.K. respondents perceived China as the major security threat in the next ten years. China was also the second most untrusted nation after Russia. There were only 22% respondents supported the U.K. to deepen her economic and trade relations with China, and only 8% supported the U.K.'s proposed tilt towards the Indo-Pacific (Ho, 2021; Le Miere, 2021). Paradoxically, in the mist of the increasingly anti-China public sentiments, Boris Johnson oddly expressed that he was actually a “fervently Sinophile” (Wintour, 2021a). In the post-Brexit Britain, to secure Britain's place in the Chinese economy and the rapidly developing Asia-Pacific regional economy, Johnson's surprisingly non-populist position reflected that he wished to negotiate and reach a new investment and market access deal with Beijing soon (Wintour, 2021a).

It is therefore safe to suggest that there has been no consensus among the British state and society in regards to what China policy should the country adopts. By end of March 2021, when Beijing announced to sanction a number of British parliamentarians for their anti-China stance in Xinjiang province, Johnson had to swing and tell in the public that ‘I stand behind sanctioned MPs’ (Graham-Harrison & Helm, 2021).

However, China is among the minority countries in the world which recorded positive economic growth since the pandemic. It became a matter of necessity for the post-Brexit U.K. to gain access to the Chinese market. Britain also needs to seek China's cooperation on urging issues such as climate change. It was therefore necessary for Boris Johnson to temporarily put aside political values (such as human rights) from economic and trade interests. By separating political differences from common economic interests, Johnson's swing-to-balance China policy actually was intended to concomitantly satisfy the Conservative Party's domestic agenda for maintaining the liberalist dominant ideology, while protecting and advancing Britain's national economic and trade interests. This creative strategy is argued to be applicable to Johnson's ‘tilt towards Indo-Pacific’ strategy (Wong, 2021a, 2021b).

British Defense Think Tank First Mentioned Indo-Pacific Strategy

In March 2020, the leading British think tank of military affairs – the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), firstly proposed that the Johnson government should review the U.K.'s priorities in the Asia-Pacific region (Nouwens, 2020). Because of Brexit, the U.K. immediately lost her dialogue partnership status within the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). London was not entitled for automatically retaining her status as a “dialogue partner”. It was only until August 2021, in response to the U.K.'s request, ASEAN

granted the status of dialogue partner to the U.K. (Strangio, 2021).² In the meanwhile, the U.K. was negotiating for new economic and trade deals and free trade agreements with many countries across the world. As such liberalist values were the products of the rules-based world order which the U.K.-U.S.-E.U. alliance shared, a post-Brexit Britain naturally found herself cannot promote liberalist values abroad on her own (Nouwens, 2020). RUSI therefore proposed the U.K. needed to explore a new Asia-Pacific strategy from seven aspects.

In the first place, China is undoubtedly important for the U.K. But the problem was that the U.K. lacked a coherent strategy. The U.K. should seek to mitigate global challenges with China in the "third country". On one hand, Britain must honestly review the trade-investment opportunities and potential free trade arrangement that China would be able to offer. On the other hand, the U.K. must realistically review the challenges that China would bring to the U.K., Asia-Pacific region and the international liberalist order. The most challenging problem is how to pragmatically maintain China relations and maintain close relationship with the U.S. (Nouwens, 2020).

Second, Britain's Asia-Pacific policy cannot be centered at China. The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic suggested that Britain needed to diversify her supply chains and economic activities in the region. The U.K. needed to strengthen collaboration with ASEAN countries. London should inform the Asia-Pacific countries what technologies and expertise could be shared with in the future, in order to help them to balance China (Nouwens, 2020).

Third, the U.K. continued to adopt the two terms of "Asia-Pacific" and "Indo-Pacific". The U.K. regarded the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean will constitute the economic centre of the future world. London also considered the strategic necessity to seek alliance with such partners as the U.S., Japan and Australia. The term "Indo-Pacific" was able to include all littoral states, whereas "Asia-Pacific" covers the regions of Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, Oceania and the Americas. The Indo-Pacific already became increasingly important for the U.K.'s defense and security, especially the regions of Indian Ocean, East Asia, ASEAN, Oceania and South Pacific. Based on historical reasons and limited resources, the U.K. should focus on Southeast Asia, East African coast and Indian Ocean. And the British Commonwealth (e.g. Singapore and Malaysia) were main collaborative partners (Nouwens, 2020).

Fourth, based on the British Commonwealth framework, the U.K. must develop regional strategy to re-make the "Maritime Commonwealth" into "U.K.'s Indo-Pacific". There are twenty-six members of the British Commonwealth who are littoral states in the Indo-Pacific, who possessed substantial maritime Exclusive Economic Zones. Based on the British Commonwealth framework, it is desirable to establish maritime economic projects, connectivity agendas and cybersecurity declarations with these countries. In doing so, non-traditional security could be integrated with innovative technologies into a broader collaborative framework, enabling these countries to make good use of the U.K.'s industrial and expertise advantage (Nouwens, 2020).

² In August 2021, ASEAN granted the U.K. the status of "Dialogue Partner".

Fifth, the U.K. should balance between sending troops and security cooperation. Although sending the HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft-carrier group to the Asia-Pacific would definitely enhance regional defense functions, the U.K. should also provide maritime law training to enhance regional countries' capacities in implementing the maritime legal order. London should also support the local governments to address the challenges of transnational crimes, cybersecurity and climate change. The U.K. could work with Indo-Pacific countries to strengthen the existing "Five Power Defence Arrangements" and the British military stationing in Brunei (Nouwens, 2020).

Sixth, the U.K. should work with partners in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia to strengthen cooperation and coordination to achieve maximum impact and avoid waste resultant of resources overlapping. Although the U.S. is the cornerstone of the U.K.'s Indo-Pacific policy, the U.K. should deepen her cooperation with France, Australia, New Zealand, India, Japan and the E.U. in the region. The U.K. should also develop relations with the rising middle-powers (e.g. Vietnam and Indonesia) in the region, and to support the regional rules-based order. Working with the regional partners would generate the position impression that the U.K. is willing to work within the existing frameworks, instead of imposing her own into the region (Nouwens, 2020).

Finally, in order to make others understand the U.K.'s national security needs, the U.K. must strengthen strategic communications with regional countries. Apart from the 'maritime Commonwealth' framework, she should strengthen the defense and security agreements with ASEAN and Japan. In fact, until March 2021, ASEAN countries had not reached a consensus in regards the U.K.'s "dialogue partner" status after Brexit. One of the reasons was that the Southeast Asian countries were worried that the U.K. would force them to side with either the U.S. or China (Tani & Bartlett-Imadegawa, 2021). It was at the U.K.'s best interest to communicate her true intentions with the countries in the region (Nouwens, 2020).

British Parliamentary Agenda Included Indo-Pacific Strategy

Based on the wider discussions stimulated by RUSI, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the British parliament's House of Commons published a policy document in October 2020, which was titled *A Brave New Britain? The Future of the UK's International Policy*. It officially included the "tilt towards Indo-Pacific" strategy into its agenda. There were four main points of significance (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2020).

In the first place, to prepare the Prime Minister for the publication of the "*Integrated Review*", the Foreign Affairs Committee believed there are promises and pitfalls in the international interdependency forged by globalization. Local challenges quickly became global crises. Nations and individuals were more easily affected by the damages caused by unnecessary local armed confrontations. Such emerging technologies as artificial intelligence gave some governments, technology firms and individuals the capacities to destroy. COVID-19 pandemic entered the human world and drastically changed the global landscape. Climate change has rapidly changed human life styles. International organizations had failed to find the right solutions. A deeper issue is that international competition is already more widely accepted than cooperation (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2020).

Second, global geopolitical changes had promoted international competition. Countries and regions outside the West were already rising with greater economic capacity and international influence. But this arena of struggle was actually between different sets of world visions, mentalities, attitudes and models. As the competition turns fiercer, democratic states will insist the basic values of the rules-based international system, including democracy, human rights and free trade. Global competition also involved the competition between different technological systems, which lost their compatibilities. As countries were forced to take side, their previous decisions made have become more irreversible, and the sunk costs of emerging technologies were causing these countries to encode their own values into the core spirits of their national economic systems (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2020).

Third, competition halted multilateral cooperation. Great power competition had challenged international arbitration mechanisms. As the world became more divided, it lacked the leadership to reach consensus, rendering problems harder to be resolved. Powerful countries including the U.S. and China lost their leadership roles in the world, because they undermined multilateral agreements for the sake of their own interests. Other countries had no better choice but to seek for alternatives for global cooperation (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2020).

Fourth, a more assertive China and a more inward-looking America were generating more geopolitical frictions. China and Russia were the main authoritarian and revisionist states, who wielded more international influences than other ideological competitors. But the U.K.'s international policy had been inconsistent, incoherent and lack of self-confidence. Other countries perceived the U.K. lost her ambition or retreat from the world-stage. But the U.K. should play a more influential role in the world, should have confidence in her capacity. The *'Integrated Review'* will address the problems that the U.K. lacked visions and confidence, and propose a coherent international policy (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2020).

This policy must include how to resolve problems with the world under the condition of limited resources. It should also make good use of the U.K.'s thought-leadership status, legal skills and coordination capacity to devise a new international cooperative framework, so that other countries and individuals will be able to share the benefits of emerging technologies and global connectivity. The U.K. also needed to enhance her resilience to cope with domestic and external threats. It was Britain's long-term necessity to "tilt towards the Indo-Pacific", which requires the U.K. 'a strong base' in Europe (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2020).

Assessments by British and Indo-Pacific Leaders

In November 2020, the British centrist-right think tank "Policy Exchange" published the report titled *A Very British Tilt: Towards a New UK Strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region* (hereafter "*A Very British Tilt*") (Policy Exchange, 2020). Because *A Very British Tilt* consisted of the opinions and viewpoints of the leaders of Britain and Indo-Pacific countries (including Canada, U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia), and its foreword was written by the late former Japanese prime minister Shinzo

Abe, *A Very British Tilt* was considered of heavy weight and significant policy impacts, which consisted of eleven main points.

In the first place, British government reached the consensus that Indo-Pacific affairs will have long-term deep effect on the post-Brexit U.K.’s global security and economic future. For example, there were already 1.6 million British nationals living in the Indo-Pacific region (Policy Exchange, 2020, p.20). This figure did not include the 3 million holders of the “British National (Overseas)” status in the former British colony of Hong Kong (Table 1). In the meanwhile, the U.K.-U.S. special relationship was largely affected by America’s global strategic decisions and concerns regarding China. These include the Washington’s decision to ban Huawei globally, and her ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ military and economic policy. Being a permanent member in the United Nations Security Council and the sixth largest economy in the world, the U.K. had invested massively into the Indo-Pacific. And this trend will not be reverted.

Table 1

Recent Distribution of British Nationals in the Indo-Pacific Region

Country	Number of British nationals
Australia	1,200,000
South Korea	8,000
Taiwan	2,657
Japan	26,000
Malaysia	16,000
Singapore	50,000
New Zealand	244,800
The Philippines	15,000
Thailand	55,000
India	32,000
China (including Hong Kong)	35,718 (In addition, there are 3 million holders of “British National (Overseas)” status)
Indonesia	8,640
Total	1,693,815

Sources of data: Policy Exchange (2020, p.20); Pant and Milford (2021: Table 1).

Secondly, British vision for the Indo-Pacific was to reinforce a sustainable rules-based order, so that every country will be able to cope with the great power reality of the 21st century. The U.K. recognized that China-U.S. strategic competition was intensifying, but the U.K. did not wish to seek for new Cold War but only to defend her domestic and foreign interests. Nonetheless, the U.K. will neither become value-neutrality between the U.S. and China, nor consider the “non-aligned movement” in joining forces with the smaller states to resist the U.S. and China. The U.K. should defend international cooperation, openness, respect to law and order in the Indo-Pacific, and insist the behavioral norms accepted by the

U.S. and other like-minded countries. This was the nature and gist of Global Britain's Indo-Pacific strategy (Policy Exchange, 2020, p.22).

Third, the U.S. is the U.K.'s indispensable ally in the Indo-Pacific. In order to facilitate the U.K. to be better integrated with the region, the U.K. should seek regional participation and leadership in initiatives that should reflect British interests. But the basic principle was to share the security burden with the U.K. and to support and enable British allies and partners in the region. The U.K. should not request over-ambitious leadership role (Policy Exchange, 2020, p.25).

Fourth, the U.K. must discuss Indo-Pacific affairs with the U.S., members of the "Five Eyes" intelligence alliance (including Australia, Canada and New Zealand), and the partners (e.g. Japan and India) were the core members of U.K.'s network. South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Sri Lanka were also included. London should also remain open and flexible in maintaining strategic partnerships with Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines (Policy Exchange, 2020, p.29).

Fifth, the U.K. will promote her interest in the Indo-Pacific through the "twin-track engagement" method. The first track was the "prosperity agenda", which focused on trade, economic and technological topics, especially the questions of "technological decoupling with China", intellectual property rights, digital standards, scientific cooperation, sustainable development, climate change and environmental protection. Moreover, the digitalization of Chinese currency was also important, which should include the potential consequences of China's initiative to avoid using Western international payment and transaction systems (Policy Exchange, 2020, p.30).

The second track was "security agenda". The U.K. will seek to strengthen the Indo-Pacific regional security and the domestic socio-economic systemic resilience of the most vulnerable countries. Apart from conventional military hard power, the U.K. will support regional strategic balance, in order to address the challenges of information and political warfare, cyber threats, bio-weapons and public health. To strengthen alliance, rules-based Indo-Pacific order and to increase the cost of the country that violates the international norms, London will invest more foreign policy resources to the forums and summits in the region.

Sixth, a goal of "Global Britain" was to achieve the signing of 80% of the total free trade agreements by 2023, including the U.K.-U.S. trade agreement. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indo-Pacific would still be the most energetic region for economic development in the world, which occupies almost half of the world's total economic productivity. The Indo-Pacific is of very importance to post-Brexit Britain. Pandemic and the U.S.-China trade war had triggered a new generation of economic diversification and growth. The world would reduce their over-dependency on China's manufacturing industry. Excluding China, the U.K.'s annual trade volume with the Asia-Pacific region already reached a total of GBP£113.2 billion. The U.K. must gain Japan's support to join the "Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership" (CPTPP). This would enable Britain's access to the third largest free trade area in the world, which constitutes 13% of the global GDP. As a global financial centre, London should become the U.K.'s policy instrument in her Indo-Pacific strategy. In doing so, the U.K. would be able to balance Beijing's "Belt and Road Initiative", which puts China to be the centre of global

economic, trade and investment flows (Policy Exchange, 2020: 31-33). Establishing “Indo-Pacific Investment Mechanism and Treaty” centering on the London Court of International Arbitration would be a way forward (Policy Exchange, 2020, p.33).

Seventh, the U.K. should promote the “Free and Open Internet Initiative” in the Indo-Pacific region. A purpose is to prevent more and more countries to use search engines to create network obstacles by passing cybersecurity laws. Another purpose is to prevent the internet service providers to pass on their customers’ data. This initiative is necessary mainly because China has been exporting technologies to neighboring countries, enabling China and her neighbors to become the surveillance-states. The U.K. should make use of the initiative to on one hand, educate the regional governments about importance of internet freedom, and not to use the internet to surveillance and censor their own citizens, civil society organizations, religious people and dissidents. On the other, it was to devise appropriate measures to rein in harmful and criminal online activities (Policy Exchange, 2020, pp.35-36).

Eighth, as the post-Brexit Britain sought for strategic autonomy, the U.K.’s position in the European Space Agency had become uncertain. In order to sustain the U.K.’s presence and development in the outer-space, the U.K. should seek to forge “Space Technology Alliance” with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, Japan and South Korea. The U.K. should remain open to the participation of other British Commonwealth countries and such Gulf states as the United Arab Emirates (Policy Exchange, 2020, p. 36).

Ninth, in terms of foreign policy, apart from strengthening relations with the British Commonwealth member-states, Southeast Asia and South Korea, London should increase her participation and presence in the “Pacific Islands Forum”. As the U.K. still has moral and legal obligations to support Hong Kong’s autonomy and freedom, she should work with allies and partners to address the challenges of the newly legislated Hong Kong National Security Law. These include the route of granting British citizenship status to the holders of the “British National (Overseas)” passport, supporting Hong Kong civil society organizations, and sanctioning responsible Chinese government officials (Policy Exchange, 2020, p. 39).

The U.K. should also expand diplomatic relations and cooperation with Taiwan. As a vibrant democracy and open trade system, Taiwan is a model of the Indo-Pacific countries. London should work with Taipei to establish ministry-level relations, explore free trade agreement, supporting Taiwan to participate in international multilateral forums, allowing Taiwan to join all the U.K.’s initiatives, and coordinating with America to normalize everyday contacts and cooperation with Taiwan (Policy Exchange, 2020, p.40).

Tenth, London should adopt the “ethical egoism” ethics in ancient tradition of British realism, to pragmatically promote the freedom of Indo-Pacific countries. The U.K. should make use of the United Nations’ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” as the basic principle, to construct the “Indo-Pacific Public Integrity Forum” multilateral initiative to promote the values of Westminster parliamentary democratic model, including electoral safety, governmental transparency and political pluralism (Policy Exchange, 2020, pp.41-42).

Last but not the least is security and defense cooperation. Upon the existing agreements (Table 2), the U.K. should set the objectives of “reciprocal access” and “base support agreements”. This was intended to establish base cooperation framework to maintain regional stability with such partners as Japan and India. Based on the naval cross-servicing agreements signed with the U.S. and Japan, British military should increase their visiting frequency in the region. London should also seek to sign similar agreements with Australia and Singapore (Policy Exchange, 2020, p. 47).

Table 2
The U.K.’s Security Agreements in the Indo-Pacific Region

Agreement	Partner	Signing Year
Five Powers Defence Arrangements	Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia	1971
Five Eyes	Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the U.S.	1941
Defence Logistics Treaty	Japan	2017
Defence and Security Cooperation Treaty	Australia	2013
Arrangements for a United Kingdom Force in Negara Brunei Darussalam	Brunei	2015
Defense Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding	Singapore	2018
Defence Equipment Memorandum	India	2019
Protection of Classified Military Information Agreement	South Korea	2009
Memorandum of Understanding on Defense Cooperation	The Philippines	2017
United Kingdom-Thailand Strategic Dialogue	Thailand	2012
Memorandum of Understanding on Defence-related Cooperation	Vietnam	2017

Source of data: Policy Exchange (2020, p. 48).

The British territory and military base in the Indian Ocean – Diego Garcia islands, will be the permanent and ideal stationing post for the British navy. As the military base is presently administered and used by the American military, the U.K. should seek to ensure its smooth and continuous operation and to avoid disagreement and conflict with the U.S. Diego Garcia should be strategically linked with the French Réunion Island in the western tip of the Indian Ocean, the Australian Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the eastern end of the Indian Ocean. International investments in these linked islands could

protect freedom of navigation, counter piracy and facilitate security cooperation (Deutsch Welle, 2021; Policy Exchange, 2020, p.48; Rogers, 2020; Storey, 2020).

The Boris Johnson Government's Assessment

Synthesizing the above public policy discussions, in March 2021, the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson also proposed the U.K. to consider the “tilt towards the Indo-Pacific” in the “*Integrated Review*”. He had at least five considerations (Her Majesty Government, 2021, pp. 66-67; Laskar, 2020; RTHK, 2021a, 2021b; Sabbagh, 2021; Wintour, 2021b).

Firstly, the U.S. and European countries will become the U.K.’s most important and vital partners. It was partially because the U.K. would still need to address Russian threats to the Eastern Europe through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Her Majesty Government, 2021, p.61).

Secondly, based on shared history, values and people-to-people linkages, Britain will continue to deepen her relationships with Australia, Canada, New Zealand and British Commonwealth countries. She will also continue to conduct defense and security cooperation with the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand through the “Five Eyes” alliance, in order to address pandemic and seek for signing bilateral free trade agreements (Her Majesty Government, 2021, p. 61).

In the Indo-Pacific region, Japan would be considered the U.K.’s closest strategic partner, while the relations with South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Singapore would be strengthened. The U.K. would continue to promote the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, and develop security, prosperous and stable relationship with Pakistan, as well as supporting the stability in Afghanistan. The U.K. will deepen her economic and trade, cultural, investment and technology partnership with India. The British-Indian relations will become more vital than ever to the U.K.’s economic, trade, investment, technology, energy, climate change and public health engagement in the Indian Ocean. The U.K. diplomatic mission in India will be the largest in scale, where there will be more than eight hundred personnel stationing in eleven offices (Her Majesty Government, 2021, p. 62).

Thirdly, China is the present world’s most significant geopolitical factor, which has deep and long-term impacts to the U.K.’s value system and interest as well as to the world order. As an authoritarian state, China challenges the values and causes concerns of the U.K. and allies. In the future ten years, China’s contribution to the global economic growth will be bigger than any country in the world. Although the U.K.-China bilateral trade and investment relations benefit both sides, China remains the largest “state-based threat” of the British economy (Her Majesty Government, 2021, pp. 62-63).

Fourthly, the U.K. will devise a new foreign policy framework to manage disagreements, defend values and preserve the cooperative space that is at the interests of everyone. The U.K. will need China’s cooperation to address the global challenges of pandemic, bio-diversity and climate change. The U.K. will deepen her economic and trade relations with China, allowing more Chinese investments in the U.K. (Her Majesty Government, 2021, pp. 62-63).

Finally, the U.K. will strengthen the protection of critical network infrastructure, its institution and sensitive technology. She will also strengthen the resilience of her own supply chains. When China violates existing agreements, the U.K. will voice out, defend her own values and interests. The U.K. already provided the route for the holders of the "British National (Overseas)" passport to migrate to the U.K., and also devised measures to ensure British organizations would not benefit from the profits generated from activities of human right violations in Xinjiang province (Her Majesty Government, 2021, pp. 62-63).

Based on the above strategic considerations, Johnson's "tilt towards Indo-Pacific" policy framework has four main characteristics. First, there are about 1.7 million British citizens living in the Indo-Pacific region. As the region is undoubtedly important to the British economy and security, London will support the region's open societies. Indo-Pacific is also the world's engine for economic growth. With half of the world's population live in the Indo-Pacific, 40% of global GDP originates from the region. The region also houses the world's fastest developing economies, and therefore located at the cutting-edge of global free trade agreements. Indo-Pacific also leads the research and development of the newest digital technologies and their standards. It also invested a lot to renewable and green energy. Indo-Pacific has contributed 17.5% of the U.K.'s global trade volume, 10% of the U.K.'s foreign direct investments came from the Indo-Pacific (Her Majesty Government, 2021, p.66).

Second, Indo-Pacific has geopolitical hotspots, including territorial disputes, nuclear proliferation, climate change, cybersecurity and terrorist threats. Many British products need to pass by these geopolitical chokepoints. Freedom of navigation is of utmost importance to British interests (Her Majesty Government, 2021, p.66). The U.K. will strengthen her military and security capacity with her partners in the region.

Third, the U.K. will work with like-minded countries to foster open society and support free trade, and to maintain a secured and stable set of international rules and norms. Britain will become the Indo-Pacific's most significant bilateral and multilateral partner in Europe. London will use the "Five Powers Defence Arrangements", ASEAN and the Pacific Islands Forum to support regional partners, and to work with France, Germany and others to defend regional peace and security (Her Majesty Government, 2021, p.66).

Finally, the U.K. will sign new free trade deals with Australia and New Zealand, join CPTPP, strengthen supply chain resilience, become ASEAN's dialogue partner, strengthen defense and security cooperation through foreign military bases, enhance cybersecurity cooperation, address climate change and deepen technology cooperation (Her Majesty Government, 2021, p. 67).

Reasons Why the U.K. Tilts Towards Indo-Pacific

In a nutshell, British scholars and think tanks attributed the U.K.'s tilt towards the Indo-Pacific to several factors (Hayton, 2020; Pant & Milford, 2021): (1) historical legacy, (2) national economic necessity, (3) re-evaluation of China, and (4) U.K.-U.S. relationship.

First is historical legacy. As early as 1965, British Ministry of Defence already devised an Indo-Pacific strategy. However, the Suez crisis in 1968 forced the U.K. to give up her

military bases in Singapore and Malaysia. It was not a coincidence that the U.K.'s Indo-Pacific strategy already mentioned the notion of 'balance of power', in order to address China's increasing military might. Since the British military left Singapore and Malaysia in 1968, the British government was preoccupied by the Soviet military threats in Europe. Later the U.K. was embroiled in the Middle East crises, which left her no time and energy for the Indo-Pacific.

Second reason entails British economic needs. The U.K.'s national economic crisis started in 2008 global financial crisis, when the former Prime Minister David Cameron adopted austerity policy. Since then, the U.K. has sought foreign direct investments from the emerging economies in the Indo-Pacific. In the similar timing, the 2008 global financial crisis also marked the watershed wherein the U.K.'s trade volume with non-E.U. countries surpassed of those with E.U. countries. These trends made the British government realized that the global economic centre was shifting to the East. The U.K. has then sought trade and economic development with China, and allowed Chinese state-owned enterprises to enter the British market (Pant & Milford, 2021).

The U.K.'s 2016 decision to leave the E.U. also triggered economic crisis, which sped up the U.K.'s diversification for strategic development options and enhanced the U.K.'s economic and trade relations with non-E.U. countries and regions. Because the most energetic economies concentrated in the Indo-Pacific region, the U.K. naturally needs to target the region. After the 2016 Brexit referendum, Boris Johnson (being the foreign secretary in 2016) openly criticized the U.K.'s 1968 decision to retreat from the east of Suez Canal was wrong, and further expressed his wish to deepen the U.K.'s economic, trade and security ties with the Indo-Pacific region (Pant & Milford, 2021).

The third reason was the changes in the U.K.-China relations had actually made the Indo-Pacific region even more important than before. Despite the former Cameron government framed the bilateral relations as the "golden era", the U.K. establishment still perceived China as a threat. For example, in the South China Sea, the U.K.'s trade volume through the disputed maritime region was actually the largest among European countries in terms of the percentage of all national trade in goods (Table 3). Since 2012 when the U.K. and Japan signed their defense agreement, British strategic activities in the Indo-Pacific have become active. These included her maritime military drill with the U.S. and Japan. In 2018, the U.K. sent the warship HMS Argyll to the South China Sea, whose proclamation for "freedom of navigation" challenged China's sovereignty claim. At that time, the U.K. was the only country after the U.S. to take such kind of action.

Table 3

A Comparison of the Major Countries’ Trade Values through the South China Sea (SCS) in 2016.

Country	% share of world GDP	Trade value through SCS (Billion US\$)	SCS Trade as a % of all trade in goods
U.S.	24.5%	208	5.72%
China	14.8%	1470	39.5%
Japan	6.53%	240	19.1%
Germany	4.58%	215	9%
U.K.	3.46%	124	11.8%
France	3.26%	83.5	7.77%
India	2.99%	189	30.6%

Source of data: Pant and Milford (2021: Table 2).

In recent years, the U.K. re-evaluated her China relations made London realized that economic and trade relations cannot be detached from British global security. China’s Australian policy in 2020 also made the British political circle realized that economic and investment over-dependency on China would render the U.K. into a disadvantageous position, which would be vulnerable to Beijing’s political pressure. COVID-19 pandemic also made the British government not to raise any criticism against Beijing’s handling of the pandemic because she was afraid that China would stop exporting critical health care products and protective gears to the U.K. Moreover, British security and intelligence agencies were also gradually concerned about the economic espionage activities in the U.K. In order to protect British firms’ intellectual property rights, the Johnson government introduced “National Security and Investment Bill” in 2019. The bill was aimed to tighten the governance and increase scrutiny on technologies of military-civilian dual usage. The bill also authorized the U.K. to conduct pre-entrance background checks on Chinese academics and researchers (Pant & Milford, 2021).

Certainly, a few significant events have significantly changed the U.K.-China relations. These included Beijing’s implementation of the Hong Kong National Security Law in 2020, the “wolf warrior diplomacy” narrative and the accusations of Xinjiang province’s Uyghur human right violations generated by Western media during the COVID-19 pandemic, and London’s 2021 decision to grant Hong Kong people who hold “British National (Overseas)” status a new immigration route to become British citizens in the U.K. (Pant & Milford, 2021).

Final reason is of America. In July 2020, the U.K. was forced by the Trump administration to ban the use of Huawei 5G technologies. Despite the decision was not desired by Boris Johnson, because the U.S. is still the largest trade partner and foreign direct investors in the U.K., also because the U.K. is a close ally of the U.S. and the U.S. was the major global security guarantor of the U.K., the U.K.’s “tilt towards Indo-Pacific” strategy inevitably had to echo the U.S.-led ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ strategy (Pant & Milford, 2021).

Addressing Strategic Passivity and China Policy Quandary: Towards a New Policy Framework

As a matter of fact, the nature of the U.K.-China relations in 2023 under Rishi Sunak and the U.K.-China relations in 2021 under Boris Johnson have not changed substantially. A common essence is that since Brexit in 2016, the U.K. needed to look for capitals, investments, and other economic and trade interests to offset the national economic losses caused by Brexit. Nonetheless, Brexit weakened the U.K.'s global position and her bargaining powers in international negotiations. Because the U.S. was still the U.K.'s largest trading country-partner (Ward, 2021, pp. 12-13), the U.K.'s economic and trade dependency on the U.S. would mean that the U.K. needs to align with the U.S. security and foreign policies. As Brexit undermined the U.K.'s long-term economic and trade relations with the E.U., the U.K. has therefore had practical necessities to strengthen her economic and trade relations with countries in the Indo-Pacific region. Such larger geopolitical and geoeconomic changes brought by Brexit have constituted the very essence of the U.K.'s China policy quandary. Drawing from scholarly discussions between March 2021 and March 2022, this China policy quandary consists of at least a few aspects.

In the first place, the U.K.'s economic and trade interests continue to contradict national security interests. Rana Mitter (2022) of Oxford University and Ken Heydon (2022) of the London School of Economics observed that although Boris Johnson stepped down in 2022, the influence of the China hawks within the Conservative Party did not diminish. In September 2022, the Conservative Party elected Liz Truss to be their leader and the British Prime Minister. During the campaign period, both Truss and her main rival – Rishi Sunak, called China as the U.K.'s main security threat (Mitter, 2022; Heydon, 2022). Mitter (2022) suggested that whilst it was easy for politicians to talk up the China threat, given the highly enmeshed U.K.-China economic and trade relations, it would be very difficult to execute.

Secondly, it would be difficult to rely on the Asia-Pacific region for mitigate the economic losses caused by Brexit. Former chief economist at the U.K. government's Department of International Development and scholar L. Alan Winters (2022) of the University of Sussex suggested that it would be impossible for the U.K. to ignore China in her tilt towards the Indo-Pacific region. As China was the U.K.'s third largest trading partner (after the E.U. and U.S.), the Conservative government's positioning of China as a "threat" would not improve the U.K.'s trade performance. Though the U.K. can join the CPTPP to mitigate the economic losses caused by Brexit, joining CPTPP would not substitute a proper economic and trade policy towards China.

Winters (2022) argued that in 2019, the U.K.-Europe trade volume reached GBP£673 billion (US\$775 billion). It was estimated that by 2035, the U.K.-Europe trade volume will decrease 11.4% (GBP£77 billion or US\$89 billion). In the short run, it would be very hard to siphon the still-to-be-determined economic and trade benefits from the geographically faraway Indo-Pacific region, to rescue the geographically much closer U.K.-E.U. relations, and the more immediate and urgent economic losses with Europe caused by Brexit (Winters, 2022).

Thirdly, the Biden government's "dual containment" strategy towards Russia and China in Europe and Asia respectively, has rendered the U.K. to the position of 'strategic passivity', as opposed to strategic autonomy (Wong, 2022a). As the U.S. has been enforcing integrated deterrence policies to contain Russia and China in the European and Asian rimlands (Wong, 2022b), on one hand, the U.K. has been actively supporting Ukraine against Russia since the Ukraine War broke out in February 2022. On the other hand, as the U.S.'s key ally, the U.K. has been inevitably drawn into the U.S.'s larger geopolitical containment in terms of new alliances (e.g. AUKUS) and military activities (e.g. joint exercises) in the Indo-Pacific to counter China's growing assertiveness in such disputed maritime areas as East China Sea, South China Sea and the Taiwan strait. The U.K.'s increasing strategic passivity would naturally impact the U.K.-China economic-trade relations, and the U.K.'s relations with other Asian countries, which would eventually impact the U.K.'s economic security.

For example, in mid-March, when the Chinese electric car manufacturer BYD considers investing a new car plant in Europe, BYD ruled out the option of investing in the U.K., citing Brexit as the main reason (Sweeney, 2023). Because the leading American global investor – Warren Buffet's investment firm Berkshire Hathaway – is actually BYD's largest shareholder, BYD's decision to exclude the U.K. reflected that the U.S.-backed Chinese high-end technology firm did not see a positive prospect in the U.K. economy (Campbell, 2023; Evans, 2023; Market Screener, 2023). It is evident that Brexit did not only weaken the U.K.-Europe economic-trade relations, but also undermined the U.K.'s economic-trade relations with the U.S. and China.

In view of the above three aspects of the U.K.'s China policy quandary, I argue that the China policy framework offered by the former British diplomat and scholar Kerry Brown (2021) of King's College London to be a reasonable and balanced one. In terms of historical context of the U.K.-China relations, Brown (2021) reflected that the open-door policy adopted by Beijing since 1980s has convinced some British leaders and people to the optimism that the communist China's political system would eventually transform to be a West-like liberal democracy. The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident triggered a divisive debate among the British public regarding what China policy should be adopted by the U.K. government. Starting from that historical juncture, some China hawks in the U.K. started to consider adopting a more confrontational stance of decoupling with China. However, as China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001 which then deeply integrated China into the world economic system and further led to China's economic rise, the China hawks' policy options were significantly limited in the 2000s (Brown, 2021).

Moving towards the 2010s, Hong Kong's political question became more acute. The 2019 protests in Hong Kong followed by Beijing's legislation of the National Security Law in Hong Kong significantly damaged the U.K.-China relations and trust. In the meanwhile, Brexit also isolated the U.K. and weakened her bargaining power with Beijing. The human rights controversies in Xinjiang province and Tibet, and the intensifying tensions in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea also strengthened the public opinion support, enhanced legitimacy and power of the China hawks in British state and society, who pushed for the agenda of decoupling with China (Brown, 2021).

Facing such quagmire of post-Brexit strategic passivity and China policy quandary, I agree with Brown’s (2021) constructive proposal to the British government that in order to address the increasing complex British international relations and to protect British national economic security, the U.K. was in urgent needs of recognizing three different, if not competing, China policy agendas and talents in the country: (1) China as competitor, (2) China as cooperator, and (3) China as adversary.

In other words, the U.K. government would need to devise workable strategies to concomitantly compete with, cooperate with, and confront/deter China. To ensure British strategic autonomy, these three strategies could be used separately or in combined fashion, depending on the actual strategic circumstances. I believe this is the most inclusive Indo-Pacific and China policy framework which necessitates a truly collective initiative for the British government to pool in diverse talents, skills and knowledge from all sectors and industries so that they can work together in unity for British economic security, despite their political differences.

Conclusion

Based on the above analyses, I believe the U.K. is tilting towards Indo-Pacific, instead of pivoting to Indo-Pacific. Confronted by the U.K.’s economic crisis, both Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak needed to strike a balance between economic-trade interests and global security interests. Although there are reports suggesting that the HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier group would be sent to the Indo-Pacific seas, British defense scholars suggested that due to limited defense budget, it is very unlikely for the British aircraft carrier to permanently station outside the country (Brown, 2021; Pant & Milford, 2021). The U.K. could only make use of the existing military and security agreements to protect her own economic, trade and security interests. She will dedicate more resources to speed up the negotiations for striking trade deals and signing security arrangements with the main trading partners in the Indo-Pacific (Table 4).

Table 4
Britain’s Main Trading Partners in the Indo-Pacific Region (2019)

Ranking	Country	British Export Value (Million British Pounds)
1	China	30,415
2	Japan	14,676
3	Hong Kong	13,625
4	Australia	11,993
5	Singapore	10,739
6	India	7,798
7	South Korea	6,808
8	Taiwan	3,140
9	Malaysia	2,687
10	Thailand	2,256

Source of data: Pant and Milford (2021: Table 3).

Facing the evolving national economic crisis after Brexit (Inman, 2021), the ongoing economic recession, and the U.K.'s historical legacy to benefit from the Eastward shift of the world's centre of economic gravity, Johnson's and Sunak's choice of the term "tilt" (instead of "pivot" strategy) was that they did not wish to give the wrong impression to the Indo-Pacific countries that the U.K. government was thinking of containing China. On one hand, they did not want to damage the China-U.K. economic-trade relations. On the other hand, to prevent the U.K.'s economic, trade and security relations with a wide array of Indo-Pacific countries from being affected by the intensifying U.S.-China competition, they did not wish to ask or force the Indo-Pacific countries to take side (Ravenhill, 2021).

Therefore, the future British government will continue to strike a balance between the growing China-U.S. economic and trade relations, and the U.K.'s national economic security interests. Because China's growing economic capability will continue to be significant, while the U.K. will try her best to manage her relations with China, Washington and allies as well as partners in the Indo-Pacific, China will also be managing these complex relationships (Wong, 2021a, 2021b).

Finally, after drawing selected discussions from various British scholars and practitioners from March 2021 to March 2023, I outlined an inclusive Indo-Pacific and China policy framework for the British government to consider. The gist of this framework is to pool in diverse talents and knowledge in order to achieve the contradictory results of competing with, cooperating with and deterring China.

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The United Kingdom's "Tilt towards the Indo-Pacific" Strategy:
Public Policy Development, Strategic Intent, and Policy Framework