

Return of the Old Giant to Indo-Pacific

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The Indo-Pacific has evolved into a major geopolitical realm, drawing the attention of key regional and non-regional players. The announcement of AUKUS—a security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US)—on 15 September 2021 has added a significant aspect to the defence arrangement within the Indo-Pacific. As reiterated by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the AUKUS intends to maintain stability and peace within the Indo-Pacific region.¹ A complicated and technologically challenging grouping, this strategic maritime partnership aims to arm Australia with nuclear-powered submarines.

Apart from AUKUS, Britain has also carried out its very first tri-service defence exercises with India in the past few months. Britain is the third state, after Russia and the US, with which India has been engaged in such exercises. These military exercises and AUKUS have staged the return of Great Britain in the ‘East of Suez’.

ERSTWHILE POWER

The Indo-Pacific was once referred to as East of Suez by Great Britain. This phrase was coined by Rudyard Kipling in his poem *Mandalay* and was adopted by the British defence establishment. Thus, British enclaves and colonies which were located in Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and the Pacific were labelled as East of Suez. Towards the

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end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, extensive British occupation, a prerequisite of an imperial power, brought together states from the South Pacific to the Suez. Indeed, it was Britain's dominance over marine spaces in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and some areas of the Pacific that helped it to emerge as a dominant power. Prior to the capture of Singapore by the Japanese Armed Forces in 1941, Great Britain enjoyed the status of a supreme power in the region. In fact, till 1945, the waters of Indian Ocean were labelled as British lake as it comprised the biggest English-speaking area in the world. Towards the end of World War II, Great Britain was well aware of the fact that it could not manage its expansive military supremacy in this region. By 1968, the former British PM called for disengagement from the East of Suez. The power vacuum created by the British withdrawal was filled by Soviet Union and later, by the US.

Currently, the geographical scope of the Indo-Pacific has become a major consideration. As a result, 50 years later, Britain is planning a return to the East of Suez. It has clearly conveyed its desire to increase its strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific domain, evident by the 2021 AUKUS pact. According to the Integrated Review of Security, Defense, Development and Foreign Policy, Indo-Pacific has evolved as the new area of security concern, particularly with regards to cybersecurity.² Further, Britain's defence and financial interests in the Indo-Pacific have compelled it to work with key regional players, including through continuous involvement of the defence forces.

Great Britain is the third player in the much-talked-about AUKUS and this has caused a political rift with the European Union (EU), especially between France and the UK. As a result of this pact, France recently called back its envoy from Australia and New York. This has happened for the first time in more than 200 years of their diplomatic relations. However, what is interesting is that France did not recall its ambassador from Great Britain. Labelling London as 'opportunist', France perceives it as a secondary player and inferior to the US.³ On the other hand, the Johnson administration regards AUKUS as the turning point, particularly after Brexit,⁴ which defines its new Indo-Pacific policy.

WHY THE INDO-PACIFIC?

After Britain's exit from the EU, the British government has been striving to uphold the flag of a Global Britain. The aim is to increase its stakes in the global domain. The British administration has commented

that the triumph of Global Britain phenomenon would rely upon the safety of the native state and security of the Euro-Atlantic zone, while increasing its focus eastwards.⁵ The English territories within the Indian Ocean comprise the cornerstone for Great Britain in the Indo-Pacific. For instance, Diego Garcia has been sublet to the US and Duqm Port at Oman accepts aircraft carriers and is a crucial strategic area in close proximity to the Gulf of Oman and Iran. Great Britain has also extended its maritime facility in Bahrain in 2018, which was its very first base after its departure from the Suez Canal.

It is evident that since it has been involved in controversial national and regional affairs, primarily Brexit, London has begun to realise the significance of this zone in contemporary times. Post-Brexit, Britain has proposed focusing on the Indo-Pacific region—a region which is generating around half of the world's financial output. The British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab reiterated during his 2020 visit to India that all the development potential lies in the Indo-Pacific region.⁶ Thus, with a focus on assuming world leadership and changing its economic fortunes, especially after leaving the EU, London is concentrating on the Indo-Pacific. Further, identifying China as a grave adversary, Britain is attempting to counter its influence through various regional, multilateral and minilateral groupings in the South China Sea. The Johnson administration is also of the opinion that G7 and G10 should be expanded by incorporating three key Indo-Pacific states, namely, India, Australia and South Korea.⁷

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

The current stationing of carrier strike groups in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean is in accordance with the British resolve to administer a comeback in this region. Along with strategic diplomacy and stationing of the military, the UK has outlined intentions to regulate its defence arrangement within this region. The UK's comeback strengthens its relations with key partners in the Indian Ocean, such as Australia, Oman, Bahrain and Kenya. In this context, it needs to be noted that Britain is also a party to the Five Power Defence Arrangement, which encompasses states like Australia, Singapore, Malaysia and New Zealand. In addition, Britain has been making efforts to increase its engagement with Asia and, in 2021, it was granted 'dialogue partner' status by Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It is indeed essential for Great Britain

to stabilise its defence and economic association with like-minded states within the Indo-Pacific region.

The origin of the AUKUS lies in the appeal made by the Royal Australian Navy to Great Britain. Strategically, AUKUS will entitle Great Britain to have lasting stationing rights for its nuclear submarines in Australian waters. This, in turn, will empower Britain to have a continuous maritime presence in Indo-Pacific, rather than a fleeting deployment, such as the present naval group surrounding Royal Navy's flagship, *HMS Queen Elizabeth*. Moreover, for Britain, the paramount advantage of the AUKUS partnership is with regard to its military-industrial complex. After AUKUS was announced in September 2021, the Johnson administration assigned two contracts to BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce for preliminary draft work on a new generation of nuclear-powered hunter killer submarines for the British naval forces. The design costs are going to be shared by Australia, thus making it reasonable.⁸

The AUKUS also aspires to increase cooperation on the advancement of common techniques to safeguard underwater cables by utilising artificial intelligence and quantum communication.⁹ In addition, the AUKUS member states have endorsed a Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement. This agreement authorises interchange of critical and classified information, allowing Australia access to extremely sensitive information on nuclear submarine technology. Further, after the announcement of AUKUS, Britain has sought to expand its defence spending to 10 per cent in order to strengthen its image in power politics as a key player.¹⁰ In fact, the deployment of the new Royal Navy carrier strike group since 2021 reflects its inclination towards this region. The AUKUS also conforms to Britain's current Integrated Operating Concept (IOpC) since it focuses on two cardinal operations: first, engaging with the like-minded states; and second, containing antagonists with contention and combat. Thus, for Great Britain, AUKUS has a lasting strategic significance.

Apart from the logic of industrial and economic advancement for Britain, there is also the consideration of the electorate that is dependent on the AUKUS declaration. With the formal announcement of AUKUS, Boris Johnson outlined that this partnership will also result in employment generation for the youth of his nation state. He specifically reiterated that industrial blue-collar jobs will be generated for the youth in the impoverished provinces of northern parts of Britain which supported

Brexit. That sways to the conservatives in the 2019 elections however that can never be contemplated as lasting Tory constituency.¹¹

The Indian Ocean has the largest number of English-speaking states in the world. Thus, it needs to be noted that beyond the security dimension, Britain has important financial stakes in this region, along with cultural and linguistic ties. All of these have played a fundamental role in aiding Britain's return to the Indo-Pacific. London is also perceived as presumably the sole contender in the Quad Plus grouping as it has robust defence ties with its Quad counterparts, that is, India, Japan, the US and Australia.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

The Great Britain resurgence in the Indo-Pacific comes with a plethora of challenges. The initial hindrance is in terms of defence proficiency. The significant question to ponder upon is: does the UK have adequate defence expertise to support constant military presence in the Indo-Pacific waters, besides displaying its mettle to fashion the developments within the region, or whether it has to depend on the US? Another significant factor that needs immediate attention is that does the UK, after Brexit, possess the political enthusiasm, economic prowess as well as diplomatic vigour to do so? Unlike France, London does not possess an extensive web of military ports that, in turn, expedite a constant military presence within the IOR. Moreover, overhauling of the policy towards the Indo-Pacific will need the UK to enhance its military potential by splurging more on its air and naval forces. The larger question here is: if London is to direct its attention to the Indo-Pacific, then how is it going to meet the challenges within the Euro zone?

Another significant challenge for Great Britain is to reconcile its ties with the EU, particularly France, and to evolve a renewed transatlantic strategy in the Indo-Pacific zone to respond to their common adversary. In fact, as middle powers of Europe and significant weapon producers, Britain and France possess a common strategy, while engaging with the trade of armaments is devised to bind the clientele into a grade of partnership. However, the distinction between France and England is that, compared to Britain, France enjoys the status of a resident middle power within the Indo-Pacific. It is very well evident from the fact that the French enclave of New Caledonia is located next to Australia towards its eastern front. Therefore, the intention of the Johnson administration to be a major contender in the Indo-Pacific whilst drifting away from

France and the EU will be ineffective due to the presence of powerful regional players in the Indo-Pacific.

The next crucial challenge for Great Britain is the tricky question of Chagos Archipelago. Despite the fact that Mauritius regained its sovereignty in 1965, the UK reserved its supremacy over the critically located Chagos Archipelago. Further, it authorised Washington to set up a naval base at Diego Garcia. Mauritius has maintained that Chagos Archipelago is its integral part, and has also been successful in winning the legal suit at the Hague on the matter. Nevertheless, this contentious matter has to be settled between the three stakeholders and presents a hindrance in the English chronicle of its comeback into the Indian Ocean.

Eventually, an important challenge concerns Britain's ties with China and Pakistan. Beijing is a key trading partner of the UK and after Brexit, London is not in a position to face China's wrath. According to the Integrated Review, China's increasing trade with Britain has proved to be extremely significant for the latter.¹² The reinforcing of a strategic alliance with Australia and the US is bound to have grave repercussions on China's security climate within Indo-Pacific. Also, Beijing's aggressive strategy, including its absolute indifference to honour past treaties, such as the Hong Kong issue, has heavily dented the bilateral ties between Britain and China. Simultaneously, London's favourable approach towards Pakistan places an impediment on complete attainment of the objectives of the Indo-Pacific defence partnership. The question here is whether London will trivialise the contentions in these partnerships to reinforce its presence within the Indo-Pacific or East of Suez?

CONCLUSION

Great Britain has a key role to play as a major strategic player within the Indo-Pacific. However, the AUKUS agreement has resulted in a rift between France and Britain. Also, the EU is paying great attention to the Indo-Pacific region as a part of its long-term strategy. Resolutions such as Brexit, and minilaterals like AUKUS, have facilitated London's return to the East of Suez. Britain, however, needs to weigh key considerations, such as EU's strategy in the Indo-Pacific, convergence of interests and common ideals. Britain's agenda within the Indo-Pacific is premised upon focusing more on Asia. Its international diplomacy would help it to attain its intended results solely if Britain is more focused on catering to regional and national interests simultaneously. In fact, British return will

have a lasting impact upon its image as a key global power. However, its relations with EU, and particularly with France, in the near future will also play a fundamental role in shaping the essence of British comeback to the IOR.

NOTES

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3. David Camroux, 'AUKUS: Why Britain was the Big Winner', *The Diplomat*, 2 December 2021, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/aukus-why-britain-was-the-big-winner/>, accessed on 20 March 2022.
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7. Rahul Kamath, 'A Fit with the UK's Global Britain Goals', n. 5.
8. David Camroux, 'AUKUS: Why Britain was the Big Winner', n. 3.
9. Ibid.
10. Sankalp Gurjar, 'Britain Stages a Comeback in the Indian Ocean', n. 1.
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