

# Associate Paper

30 March 2021

## A “Global Britain” in the Indian Ocean Region

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### Key Points

- Since Brexit, the British Government has called for a strategic reorientation of British foreign and security policy towards the Indian Ocean region.
- The reorientation will witness an expanded British presence in the Indian Ocean, with the Royal Navy in particular adopting a proactive role.
- British foreign aid and humanitarian assistance strategies should reflect the British Government’s recognition of the importance of the Indian Ocean region to Britain’s strategic interests.
- Although much has been discussed about the UK’s potential relationship with Australia, India and Japan, the UK also has the potential to build on already established foundations with Oman, Bahrain and Singapore.

### Summary

In 2013, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) published a report, [A Return to the East of Suez?](#) The report highlighted the need for a strategic reorientation of Britain’s foreign and security policy. The report eventually faded in importance, but the calls for such a reorientation were again brought into sharp focus following Britain’s decision to leave the European Union in the 2016 referendum.

At the policy level, Prime Minister Boris Johnson signalled the British Government’s intention to undertake the most comprehensive strategic review of [‘Britain’s security, defence and foreign policy since the end of the Cold War.’](#) A central theme of the review will be an increased British presence in the Indian Ocean, both in terms of military engagement

and humanitarian assistance. Although no official British Government strategy has been implemented, a list of British military activities and government actions in the region is exhibiting the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean for British national interests.

## Analysis

### ***Setting the Scene***

The Indo-Pacific region has [emerged](#) as the centre of gravity for geopolitical and geo-economic competition. As a result, there has been a [growing recognition](#) from Westminster of the political reality of the importance that the Indian Ocean holds for the twenty-first century and British strategic interests. The allure of the Indian Ocean is clear. The UK has a vested interest in promoting a rules-based international order, securing sea lines of communication, securing free and open access to trading routes and providing sustainable infrastructure and development options. If the UK is to step up successfully in the Indian Ocean, building closer co-operation and deeper ties with allies in the region will prove essential.

A [report](#) commissioned by the UK House of Lords echoes that sentiment. The report noted that in foreign policy and national security interests, the UK has traditionally considered the views of Washington, Paris and Berlin with high regard. In light of the shift towards the Indo-Pacific region, it is increasingly relevant for Britain to now consider the views of Canberra, New Delhi and Tokyo. Regardless of the realities of physical distance, however, British commitments for further engagement in the region remain [clear](#), and the reception to this proposed engagement has remained largely [positive](#) but a central question remains: how can the UK connect itself more with the Indian Ocean region? To explain *how*, two frames become fundamental: military engagement and increased humanitarian engagement.

### ***Military Engagement***

The United Kingdom once maintained a formidable military presence in the Indian Ocean, with the region once characterised as a “[British Lake](#)”. Since the early 1970s, however, Britain’s military presence has diminished and the country continues to play a secondary role in the majority of Indian Ocean affairs, using its primary ally, the United States, as a vector to engage with Indian Ocean issues.

Despite that, the UK has maintained a [residual footprint](#) in the region, given its obligations to various locations, notably the British Indian Ocean Territory, a logistical facility in Singapore and a naval command in Bahrain. The foothold that Britain maintains should serve as a valuable platform upon which to build Britain’s Indian Ocean strategy. To provide some much-needed [assurance](#) that Britain’s strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean will not be in vain, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a [multi-year settlement](#) which provides an extra £16.5 billion (\$29.7 billion) in funding for the British Armed Forces. By far one of the largest investments is in the expansion and modernisation of the Royal Navy, consequently [repositioning it](#) as one of the world's premier power projectors.

The Government's investment strategy nonetheless is not enough. The UK needs a way to strengthen its voice on political and security considerations that are pertinent to the Indian Ocean region. To achieve that, there have been several initiatives and agreements signed by the British Government which can serve as a foundational platform with which to entrench the UK as a strategic player in the region.

### *Oman*

The first port of call to increase engagement in the Indian Ocean region comes from an unlikely source: Oman. In March 2016, the British and Omani Governments [agreed](#) on a joint partnership for the development of naval basing facilities in southern Oman. The strategic position of Oman provides the Royal Navy with a multi-directional advantage in the Indian Ocean. This will enable the UK to be more effective in deployments to combat piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and to reinforce free and open access to trading routes.

The implementation of Britain's strategy was further boosted with the signing of a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) with the Government of Oman in August 2017 for British naval access to the Duqm port. The port will serve as the operation base for the newly [commissioned](#) aircraft carrier, HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, which will benefit the Royal Navy by [supporting future carrier capability](#) and a wider British [maritime presence](#) in the region.

### *Bahrain*

As part of the strategy to re-engage with the Indian Ocean region, a secondary outpost in the Gulf region was established as a matter of strategic necessity. The Royal Navy [agreed](#) to establish a base, also known as HMS *Jufair*, in northern Bahrain, which opened in 2018 and remains the largest Royal Navy base [outside](#) of the UK. The base will serve as a strategic post to look south to the Strait of Hormuz and the entrance to the Indian Ocean. It will enable a more effective UK deployment that reinforces engagement with the Gulf states.

### *Singapore*

Singapore's strategic positioning at the east end of the Indian Ocean and as a gateway through the Strait of Malacca and an access point to the South China Sea cannot be understated. When Singapore was granted its independence (as part of Malaysia) in 1963, the defence relationship deteriorated, with the end to bilateral defence co-operation. Despite that, the UK maintained its engagement with both Malaysia and Singapore as part of the Five Power Defence Agreement (FPDA), along with Australia and New Zealand.

As tensions rise in the South China Sea and the security of the Strait of Malacca grows in importance, it is no surprise that the UK seeks to engage on a deeper and more co-operative level with Singapore. The British Defence Singapore Support Unit, the only defence presence to remain on the island is of renewed strategic importance, with calls from the British military establishment to expand the operations base. The [2015 Defence Review](#) recognised Singapore as a key player that could assist in the enhancement of the UK's presence in the region, not only from its operational base, but also as a contribution to expanding the FPDA into a [more prominent defensive posture](#) within the region.

## **Humanitarian Assistance**

Humanitarian assistance and foreign aid are categories often overlooked within the grand scheme of geopolitics. Both, however, remain fundamental for the projection of [soft power](#). Recently, the UK has maintained a globally [credible reputation](#) when it comes to its generosity towards humanitarian assistance and foreign aid. The UK has assisted in disaster relief programmes in [Australia](#), [Sri Lanka](#) and during the [2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami](#). On top of those, the UK has played an important role in the efforts concerning the aftermath of the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370 as well as the [rescue](#) of thirteen boys from a Thai cave in 2018.

It must be recognised that a hindrance to this generosity is the [recent announcement](#) that the UK Government intends to [cut £4 billion](#) (\$7.2 billion) from the foreign aid budget. The impetus behind the cut remains the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, but Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab has reiterated that the UK will commit the remaining £11 billion (\$19.8 billion) to targeted development in sustainable infrastructure projects, notably in the Indian Ocean region, with Pakistan, Yemen and Bangladesh being among the [top recipients](#).

At face value, the cuts made to the foreign aid budget suggest a reduced commitment by the UK to humanitarian assistance. Indeed, it has the potential to spill over to Britain's soft-power projection. Despite that, it would be a mistake to dismiss the significance of the cuts based on its financial contribution. What remains pertinent, and continues to be so, is that the foreign aid provided reflects a fully utilised financial commitment. This will counter the common trend of underutilisation of previous foreign aid packages, as has been witnessed from a recent [£40 million package](#) for the Seychelles and Mauritius. The decision to merge the Department for International Development (DFID) into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was designed to focus the UK's developmental efforts into more strategically relevant regions, such as the Indian Ocean.

The UK's targeted foreign aid approach also extends to the eastern rim of the Indian Ocean, with South-East Asia a priority for future targeted infrastructure investment. Among the British Government's stated intentions is for the UK to become an [official dialogue partner](#) with the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). By virtue of dialogue partner status, the UK should aim to use its presence in that organisation to promote sustainable infrastructure development, coupled with the value of a free and open Indian Ocean.

## **Conclusion**

The Indian Ocean region will be a centre of geopolitical and geo-economic significance in the twenty-first century. The geopolitical significance will arise from players like the [United States](#), [China](#), [Russia](#) and [India](#) wanting to gain a foothold in the region that connects East and West. The geo-economic significance arises from the Indian Ocean's prevalence in global economic trade routes and, therefore, the stability of the rules-based international order.

The UK is beginning to recognise the importance of the region to British [ambitions](#) to become a global player. The historical policy of disengagement East of Suez is now being

[discredited](#) and, in doing so, the UK will undoubtedly play a more proactive role in the Indian Ocean region. Despite that, the UK might find it increasingly challenging to gain a strategic advantage in the region, given its heightened significance. Yet, it would, of course, be no surprise to suggest that Britain's self-belief remains evident and, as common sense dictates, to become a "[Global Britain](#)", the British Government undoubtedly needs to pivot its strategic orientation back to the Indian Ocean, no matter the competition.

Central to the "Global Britain" narrative that is being pursued by the British Government will be the rising importance of the Royal Navy. The increased investment in naval bases, facilities and assets will be able to project British naval power more strongly into the region and will serve British diplomatic, humanitarian and military strategies. Coupled with that will be the ability to harness the Royal Navy for humanitarian, peacekeeping and foreign aid deployments. Britain's historically positive reputation in the humanitarian space, which, at face value may appear to be receding, will continue to aid the implementation of long-term, sustainable infrastructure projects that will continue to assist communities across the Indian Ocean rim.

For Westminster, the next logical step will be the establishment of an official Indian Ocean or Indo-Pacific strategy, much like its French, German and Dutch counterparts. Unlike many of its European counterparts, however, the UK has a unique opportunity to re-establish a presence in the region which it has neglected for too long.

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