



# Tailored, tokenistic, or too much?

## Assessing the Royal Navy's presence in the Indo-Pacific

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The war in Ukraine has raised fresh doubts over the will and ability of European states to play a meaningful role in the Indo-Pacific. In the United Kingdom, there is a lively debate over the utility of its 'tilt' to the region, first announced in the 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. The defence component of this policy, which largely comes under the purview of the Royal Navy, has come under sustained flak from two sides. While some dismiss the tilt as tokenistic – that is, gesture strategy – others worry that it will distort the UK's armed forces at a time when core interests in Europe are under threat.

First, the military contribution to the tilt is seen by many (including a few navalists) as "tokenistic" and a clear example of "penny packeting".<sup>1</sup> Several years ago, a former Australian admiral warned that "the promised deployments [by the Royal Navy] may be a valuable signal of British interest, but single- or even two-ship efforts run the risk of appearing as tokenism in an environment in which both resolve and military weight are increasingly important".<sup>2</sup> The implication here is that "the juice is not worth the strategic squeeze to spread already thin naval energy for little effect".<sup>3</sup> In short, why should the UK invest scarce resources in a region so far from home? The same could be asked of other European non-resident states, such as the Netherlands and Germany. Is it not better to focus entirely on the Euro-Atlantic if such limited tasking cannot achieve strategic effects?

Conversely, others warn that the policy will bend the UK armed forces out of shape. The tilt is seen in some quarters as a case of post-Brexit hubris.<sup>4</sup> The logic runs that such "grand-standing" can no longer be entertained with war once again darkening Europe's door.<sup>5</sup> Those associated with the army have been particularly critical, which is perhaps unsurprising given that the Indo-Pacific is a predominately an air and sea domain. Indeed, within days of Russia's invasion, a former head of the British Army called for a "fresh look" at the Integrated Review, which apparently "posited a pivot towards the Indo-China and East Asia region".<sup>6</sup>

In reality, the defence component of the *tilt* to the *Indo-Pacific* was much less pronounced than some (including this author) feared.<sup>7</sup> Briefings by the Ministry of Defence prior to the Integrated Review's publication in March 2021 suggested that the UK was on the verge of establishing several new military bases 'East of Suez' and stationing one of its new aircraft carriers permanently in the region.<sup>8</sup> None of this came to pass.

- 1 See contributions by General Lord Richards and David Blagden to House of Commons Defence Committee, "We're going to need a bigger Navy", Third Report of Session 2021–22, HC 168, 7 December 2021, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmdfence/168/report.html>.
- 2 James Goldrick, "The Limits of Global Britain" (Lowy Institute, 5 December 2017), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/limits-global-britain>.
- 3 Greg Kennedy's contribution, "We're going to need a bigger Navy".
- 4 Paul Mason, 'Forget Johnson's fantasies and forge a new strategy for defence', *The New European*, 4 January 2023, <https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/forget-johnsons-fantasies-and-forge-a-new-strategy-for-defence/>
- 5 Edward Lucas, 'Forget global Britain, focus defence on Europe', *The Times*, 16 January 2023, [thetimes.co.uk/article/forget-global-britain-focus-defence-on-europe-g7rvqv2h9](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/forget-global-britain-focus-defence-on-europe-g7rvqv2h9); Max Hastings, 'It's time for realism about our armed forces', *The Times*, 10 January 2023, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/its-time-for-realism-about-our-armed-forces-fvr7jbjfk>
- 6 Richard Dannatt, "Britain needs to stop focusing on China and build up its land forces", *The Telegraph*, 26 February 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/02/26/britain-needs-stop-focusing-china-build-land-forces/>.
- 7 William D. James, "There and Back Again: The Fall and Rise of Britain's 'East of Suez' Basing Strategy", *War on the Rocks*, 18 February 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/there-and-back-again-the-fall-and-rise-of-britains-east-of-suez-basing-strategy/>; and William D. James, 'Global Britain's strategic problem East of Suez', *European Journal of International Security* 6, no. 2 (2021): 171-189.
- 8 Christopher Hope, "Britain to become 'true global player' post-Brexit with military bases in South East Asia and Caribbean, says Defence Secretary", *The Telegraph*, 30 December 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/12/29/britain-become-true-global-player-post-brexit-new-military-bases/>; Lucy Fisher, "Britain set to confront China with new aircraft carrier", *The Times*, 14 July 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/britain-set-to-confront-china-with-new-aircraft-carrier-v2gnwrr88>.

In the United Kingdom, there is a lively debate over the utility of its 'tilt' to the Indo-Pacific region.

This paper explores the rationale and efficacy of small or token defence deployments – with a specific focus on the defence component of the Indo-Pacific tilt.

The Integrated Review clearly prioritised the Euro-Atlantic theatre, while defence was a modest component of the tilt. Only one of the nine action points in the Integrated Review's Indo-Pacific framework pertained to hard power deployments.<sup>9</sup> The primary focus was on economic and diplomatic engagement through bodies like ASEAN as well as initiatives such as the CPTPP.<sup>10</sup> The Ministry of Defence subsequently made clear that, after the Carrier Strike Group's deployment to the region in 2021, the UK's "persistent engagement" would be centred around two offshore patrol vessels (to be replaced by a Type 31 frigate later in the decade) and a Littoral Response Group (an auxiliary ship with around 250 Royal Marines aboard, occasionally accompanied by a frigate or a destroyer).<sup>11</sup> Royal Navy submariners will also be visiting Australian ports more often, following the signing of the AUKUS agreement in September 2021. Thus, it truly is a *tilt* rather than a *pivot*.

This paper explores the rationale and efficacy of small or token defence deployments – with a specific focus on the defence component of the Indo-Pacific tilt. It occupies the middle ground in the debate set out above. It shows that the naval effort in the Indo-Pacific – as currently constituted – will not cause undue strain on the UK's broader defence efforts in the Euro-Atlantic. Furthermore, and contrary to conventional wisdom, it argues that tokenistic naval deployments can be worthwhile – so long as the objectives are clear, expectations are managed, and they are integrated with allied and partner navies. The paper contends that the tilt is a well-conceived initiative, but some of the latter elements have been absent in its implementation thus far. It offers three recommendations for the Ministry of Defence to better tailor its contribution to the tilt, namely: (1) Enhancing coordination with Europe's naval powers, principally France; (2) narrowing the geographical and operational scope of naval activity in the Indo-Pacific; and (3) taking a more holistic approach to communications.

## The utility of token forces

If there is a consistent theme in British defence strategy in peacetime, it is the desire to achieve key policy goals at minimum expense. The limited nature of the Indo-Pacific tilt is a case in point. Consider the early successes of the two offshore patrol vessels (OPVs) currently stationed in the region. Their capabilities are well suited to address the daily risks to regional order: fishery patrol management, sub-threshold maritime coercion, disaster relief, crimes at sea, and humanitarian support.<sup>12</sup> Earlier this year, HMS Spey delivered aid to Tonga following a volcanic eruption and tsunami. HMS Tamar, meanwhile, enforced UN sanctions on North Korea and prevented illegal fishing off the Pitcairn Islands. Both ships also participated in multinational military exercises with the UK's military allies and partners, including the US, Australia, and Japan. All of this was accomplished at minimal expense to the Royal Navy; the OPVs each have a crew of 58 (compared to a single frigate's complement of 200).<sup>13</sup> Their deployment does not impose on the Royal Navy's primary responsibilities in the Euro-Atlantic.

9 HM Government, "Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy" (London, March 2021), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>.

10 CPTPP stands for the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

11 Ministry of Defence, "Defence in a Competitive Age" (London, March 2021), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-in-a-competitive-age/defence-in-a-competitive-age-accessible-version>.

12 Alessio Patalano, "Why Is a British Carrier Strike Group Heading to the Indo-Pacific", *War on the Rocks*, 11 August 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/why-is-a-british-carrier-strike-group-heading-to-the-indo-pacific/>.

13 René Balletta, "The Royal Navy in the Indo-Pacific: Don't use a sledgehammer to crack a nut", *War on the Rocks*, 5 August 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/the-royal-navy-in-the-indo-pacific-dont-use-a-sledgehammer-to-crack-a-nut/>.



Their minimal footprint and ability to perform constabulary operations enhances the UK's claim to be a responsible actor in Indo-Pacific security, a key goal of the Integrated Review. There may be concerns over their limited defensive capabilities, given the character of the security environment in the Indo-Pacific today. Yet the fact that these vessels are lightly armed means that potential adversaries do not see them as provocative.<sup>14</sup> They *should* therefore be able to go about their constabulary duties without much hindrance. Additionally, owing to their small size and "green" credentials, the OPVs can dock in a greater number of ports (particularly those with stricter environmental regulations), thus widening the options for naval diplomacy.<sup>15</sup> In short, it is clear that this "tokenistic" deployment is already having an outsized effect in achieving the UK's policy objectives.

## Uncertain priorities

The Ministry of Defence, however, is not content with just deploying OPVs to the Indo-Pacific. It intends to replace them at the end of this decade with a Type 31 frigate. The messaging here is, however, both confused and counterproductive. If the local threat environment merits the deployment of a frigate (with more lethal capabilities than an OPV), why are two OPVs there now? The first Type 31 has yet to hit the water, which raises the question: are the OPVs just a stopgap solution? If so, it suggests that strategy is being driven by procurement timelines as opposed to operational requirements. More importantly, what happens to some of the lighter constabulary operations, which underpin the UK's claim to being a good international citizen in the region, when a Type 31 replaces the two OPVs in the late 2020s? It seems doubtful that a frigate will be tasked with duties such as fisheries protection. A Type 31 could certainly supplement the OPVs, but it should not replace them.

The OPV/frigate tasking predicament gets to a broader point about the (in)consistency of the UK government's messaging. In 2023, the OPVs will be accompanied in the Indo-Pacific by a Littoral Response Group based out of Oman. The Ministry of Defence's 'Command Paper', which laid out this plan, states that the Littoral Response Group will not only contribute to regional "assurance" but will "pre-empt and deter sub-threshold activity, and counter state threats".<sup>16</sup> This bold language goes much further than the Integrated Review's framework for the Indo-Pacific, which does not mention deterrence.

What therefore is the goal of the Royal Navy's contribution to the Indo-Pacific tilt? Is it deterrence? If so, what is the target? Is it reassurance, safeguarding shipping lanes, or underlining a more universal value such as freedom of navigation? These are distinct objectives, which merit different solutions.<sup>17</sup> Strategy, grand or otherwise, is about making choices; setting a laundry list of objectives is not realistic, given the limited extent of the tilt.

Muddling the objectives and signals may have further side effects. During a crisis, adversaries might not distinguish between the assets that the Royal Navy assigns for reassurance and

14 In 2021, Chinese state media asserted that the two OPVs would have "minimal influence" on "the military power balance in the region, and are of no military threat to China". Liu Xuanzun, "UK sends 'less-capable' warships to Asia-Pacific, 'no threat to PLA'", *Global Times*, 7 September 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1233626.shtml>.

15 Although the UK retains a number of small military facilities in the Indo-Pacific, both vessels are not bound to a particular base. They are instead utilising the ever-growing number of berthing rights that the UK has across the region, thanks to its web of alliances and partnerships.

16 Ministry of Defence, "Defence in a Competitive Age", 48.

17 Paul van Hooff, Benedetta Girardi, and Tim Sweijs, "Guarding the Maritime Commons: What role for Europe in the Indo-Pacific", *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies* (February 2022): 51, <https://hcsc.nl/report/guarding-the-maritime-commons-europe-in-indo-pacific/>.

The minimal footprint OPVs and their ability to perform constabulary operations enhances the UK's claim to be a responsible actor in Indo-Pacific security.

deterrence and those it deploys for lighter, constabulary work. The latter could then become prey for an adversary operating at the sub-threshold of war. Consider, for example, if one of the OPVs is involved in an incident with a large Chinese coast guard ship or one of its armed fishing fleets. Blurring the messaging risks turning such unprovocative deployments into liabilities.

## The challenge of deterrence and reassurance

There is considerable academic debate over the ability of naval forces to reassure allies and partners – that is, the ability to make allies feel more secure from external threats. Reassurance is a function of *capability* (a state's ability to effectively bring military force to bear and impose costs on adversaries) and *resolve* (how willing a state's leaders are to use force and accept costs in doing so).<sup>18</sup> Some scholars argue that ships cannot telegraph resolve, as they can be easily redeployed – unlike a small but permanent garrison of troops. Embedded soldiers, who regularly interact with the local population, might inspire more confidence for an ally or partner than a warship patrolling somewhere off its coast.<sup>19</sup> Ground forces imply that the state has 'skin in the game' should hostilities break out.<sup>20</sup> Recent research, however, suggests that such 'tripwires' are insufficient. For true reassurance, the state would need to deploy a substantial warfighting capability in and around allied and partner countries.<sup>21</sup>

Yet deploying large numbers of troops is neither feasible, nor desirable, for the UK – or any European actor – in the Indo-Pacific. A counterview to these land-centric positions holds that the specific dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, which is predominately an air and sea domain, make naval deployments the ideal tool for reassuring allies and partners. Not only do naval deployments demonstrate capability (persistently projecting power far from home is a logistical feat that only a handful of navies can manage), but they also demonstrate resolve, as the security environment is hazardous.<sup>22</sup>

The UK's contribution to deterrence and reassurance in the Indo-Pacific will come through its extant capabilities, such the Carrier Strike Group, the Littoral Response Group, and assault submarines, as well as collaborative technology initiatives like AUKUS and the Global Combat Air Programme with Japan and Italy. Being permanently based in the region, the Littoral Response Group will be at the coalface. How credible is this as a tool for deterrence and reassurance? The fact that the UK is willing to deploy such assets far from home is a sign of its resolve. In terms of capability though, 250 Royal Marines, however well trained, may struggle to reassure allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, particularly since that the UK has no binding alliance treaties in the region.<sup>23</sup> It is unlikely that such a small force could 'deter by denial'.

18 Brian Blankenship & Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Trivial Tripwires? Military Capabilities and Alliance Reassurance", *Security Studies* 31, no. 1 (2022): 96.

19 Michael Allen Hunzeker and Alexander Lanoszka, "Landpower and American Credibility", *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (2016): 17-26; Blankenship & Lin-Greenberg, 'Trivial Tripwires?', 98.

20 On the logic of tripwires, see Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (Princeton: Yale University Press, 1966), 47; James D. Fearon, "Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 41:1 (1997), 70.

21 Dan Reiter and Paul Poast, "The Truth about Tripwires: Why Small Force Deployments Do Not Deter Aggression", *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 3 (2021): 33–53; Blankenship & Lin-Greenberg, "Trivial Tripwires?", 96.

22 Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Reassurance and Deterrence in Asia", *Security Studies* 31, no. 4 (2022): 743-750.

23 The UK is a signatory of the Five Power Defence Arrangements with Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and New Zealand, but this is not a collective defence treaty. The parties have only committed to "consult" with one another in the event of external aggression. The UK, Australia, and New Zealand have a special relationship, which is not formalised in an alliance treaty, but it has been longstanding assumption of British defence planners that they would go to their former dominions' aid were they faced with an imminent and existential danger.

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Yet the UK has no intention of deploying forces like the Littoral Response Group in isolation. Their success will depend on close integration with allied and partner navies, likely in informal minilateral formats. This kind of cooperation aligns with the Biden administration's idea of "integrated deterrence". Additionally, the Indo-Pacific is a vast space, so prioritising subregions of focus is essential. Given that it will be based in Oman, it would be sensible for the Littoral Response Group to concentrate on the UK's policy goals in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, as opposed to those further east.

What of the Carrier Strike Group (CSG)? Comprised of an aircraft carrier, frigates, destroyers, support ships, and attack submarines, the 2021 deployment (taken in conjunction with allied ships from the Netherlands and the United States – an early proof of concept for "integrated deterrence") was the most powerful combination of vessels that the Royal Navy has assembled since the 1970s. With regard to resolve, the British government is planning for "a regular drumbeat of CSG deployments to the Indo-Pacific region", but how realistic is that?<sup>24</sup> Even before the fighting in Ukraine intensified in 2022, this question was being asked.

The Ministry of Defence's Command Paper contains a pledge to keep a Carrier Strike Group "permanently available to NATO".<sup>25</sup> The wording here is key. How elastic is that commitment? If loose, the Carrier Strike Group might be made available to NATO at two months' notice (in which case it could sail 'East of Suez' and still make it back to the Euro-Atlantic). Given the war in Ukraine, however, that seems improbable. It will likely be closer to two weeks' notice, which would prohibit a deployment to the Indo-Pacific. Those fearing the tilt will turn into a pivot should therefore be reassured by the likelihood that the UK's naval commitments to NATO will remain tight for the foreseeable future.

The UK can, however, still play a role in ensuring that the tempo of *European* carrier deployments remains steady. Enhanced cooperation with Europe's principal naval powers, notably France (the only other European state with an aircraft carrier), should be explored with urgency. The UK-France summit in March 2023 offers the ideal chance to discuss how to better coordinate naval deployments to the Indo-Pacific.

The AUKUS pact, meanwhile, may prove to be the most tangible example of the UK's commitment to establishing (conventional) deterrence in the region. Since it was first announced by the leaders of the UK, Australia, and the US in September 2021, information on this technology accelerator or transfer agreement has been scarce.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, this vacuum has been filled with misinformation (which Chinese fans have helped to circulate). Concerns over nuclear proliferation, for example, are wide of the mark. AUKUS consists of two pillars of cooperation, the first of which will see Australia develop nuclear-powered submarines. These boats, which are not only faster but can also operate for longer periods of time and at greater range than their diesel-electric equivalents, will enhance Australia's naval reach, thus shifting the regional balance of power in a more favourable direction to UK-US interests. The second pillar will see collaborative research on advanced capabilities (e.g., undersea warfare, artificial intelligence, hypersonic weapons), which will enhance the conventional deterrent capabilities of the UK, as well as its allies and partners.

AUKUS therefore has great potential, but it also highlights the difficulty in trying to pursue multiple goals concurrently. As discussed, minilateral cooperation with key European allies will

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Defence written evidence, "We're going to need a bigger Navy".

<sup>25</sup> Ministry of Defence, "Defence in a Competitive Age", 14.

<sup>26</sup> Alessio Patalano, "AUKUS is not an alliance for nuclear deterrence", *Nikkei Asia Review*, 15 September 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/AUKUS-is-not-an-alliance-for-nuclear-deterrence>.

The Indo-Pacific is a vast space, so prioritising subregions of focus is essential. For example, it would be sensible to concentrate the UK's policy goals in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

be crucial to the success of the UK's defence tilt to the Indo-Pacific. Yet the way in which the AUKUS was announced undermined this goal. Most obviously, French pride was wounded in losing a lucrative submarine contract with Australia. It was also particularly unfortunate that the agreement was unveiled at the same time as the European Union's Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, which resulted in the latter being overshadowed.

For the tilt to be a success, the UK must demonstrate that it is alert to the concerns of 'swing states' in the region. Regional reactions to AUKUS, however, were mixed. Many states welcomed the pact (albeit quietly in some cases), but Indonesia and Malaysia voiced reservations. Both have repeated misinformation about nuclear proliferation and warned that AUKUS may undermine regional security by further stoking an arms race. Such a misunderstanding is hardly ideal for the UK's engagement with either state, as well as ASEAN (with which the UK achieved 'Dialogue Partner' status the month prior to the AUKUS announcement). Jakarta's reactions might have been avoided or at least muted if the communications had been handled better.

Small forces are already having an outsized effect in the region.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the utility of token naval deployments as part of the UK's tilt to the Indo-Pacific. Its arguments challenge the assumption that tokenistic deployments are *always* a strategically unsound idea. Evidently, small forces are already having an outsized effect in the region. The two offshore patrol vessels are strengthening the UK's status as a responsible actor in the Indo-Pacific. The Littoral Response Group may also prove to be a valuable initiative *if* it is closely embedded with allied and partner navies. Crucially, neither deployment risks impinging on the Royal Navy's core tasks in the Euro-Atlantic.

The Ministry of Defence has bold ambitions for its Indo-Pacific tilt, yet the resourcing behind them is limited. There seems to be divergence between some of the Ministry of Defence's strategy documents and the overarching Integrated Review. Bringing these into line is essential in the short term. The UK government is currently amending the 2021 Integrated Review, but it is really the Ministry of Defence's Command Paper which requires retailoring. For the defence 'tilt' to be a success, naval planners must better prioritise among objectives and hone their efforts geographically. Moreover, the Ministry of Defence would do well to consider how its initiatives affect other aspects of the tilt. Taking a more holistic approach to communications will ensure that the government's position is coherent. Above all, the UK must deepen its efforts to coordinate deployments with other European naval powers.

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