CHAPTER 7

The Impact of Brexit on East Asian Security: A Taiwanese Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

A fundamental truism in international relations is that the break-up of a powerful geopolitical entity grants relative gains to competing great powers. This is arguably one of the reasons for the intense consternation at both the timing and political ramifications of Brexit, which is occurring at the very moment that Russia, and an increasingly bellicose China, are exploiting the destabilising impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to challenge Western hegemony. This is a problem which threatens the integrity and perhaps even viability of the rules-based global order which the latter underpins. One region in which these concerns have been particularly acute is the western Pacific, where Chinese territorial intrusions, low-level maritime clashes, efforts to reclaim and militarise reefs, and a concerted

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attempt to gradually continentalise maritime space in the South China Sea have caused considerable alarm among East and Southeast Asian nations. Concerns that Brexit could weaken the capacity of the West to respond effectively to these growing challenges have been widely expressed. In Chapter 6, for example, David Warren notes the Japanese Government’s aim “to minimise any negative impact of the perceived weakening of British influence, with its consequential impact on geopolitical and global economic stability, once the UK has left the EU.”

When looked at from the perspective of the unique geostrategic predicament of Taiwan, the picture of the potential impact of Brexit on regional security in the western Pacific is arguably different. The strategic threats facing Taiwan are profound in scale but relatively modest in their complexity. China’s territorial claims over the island dwarfs and arguably obviates potential threats from other state actors. Moreover, the combination of China’s growing military prowess and Taiwan’s woeful strategic depth means that essentially but one global power—the United States—has the military capabilities to head off Chinese aggression, and through so doing profoundly diminish China’s capacity to leverage pronounced asymmetries across the Taiwan Strait to compel Taiwan to relinquish its sovereignty on Beijing’s terms. In view of this, for Taiwan, the impact of Brexit on Europe pales in significance to another ongoing geopolitical transformation—a nascent shift in the balance of power between the United States and China in the western Pacific. Evaluating the significance of Brexit on East Asian security from a Taiwanese perspective thus brings to the fore another metric, which is whether any detrimental impact on the economic and geostrategic power of Europe is offset by any potential positive impact Brexit may have on America’s strategic situation in the western Pacific in particular. It could be contended that on this metric, a different appraisal of the ramifications of Brexit emerges that deviates from the more prevalent view that it will likely reduce the West’s capacity to curtail China’s growing bellicosity and inchoate yet accelerated march towards hegemony in that region.

This chapter argues that from the perspective of Taiwan’s distinctive strategic predicament, Brexit, and in particular the “Global Britain” policy platform that began to take a more concrete form in the wake of the referendum, is spurring what is, on the balance of probabilities, shaping to be a positive development in East and Southeast Asia’s security architecture. This assessment is based on the core supposition that for Taiwan, any reduction in the influence of the European Union is secondary to
the more significant geostrategic shift that is occurring in the balance of power between the United States and China in the western Pacific.

On this measure, we argue that under the “Global Britain” policy platform, Britain’s growing willingness to augment the strength of a United States-led regional alliance, and through so doing potentially arrest China’s seemingly ominous trajectory towards regional hegemony, offsets the impact of the potential reduction in Europe’s soft and hard power deterrents against unilateral Chinese actions in the region. To support this assertion, we focus on analysing two aspects. Firstly, the test case of Britain and Europe’s engagement, immediately prior and subsequent to the Brexit referendum, in territorial disputes in the South China Sea—a theatre which is of strategic importance to Taiwan, and a testing ground for measuring Western resolve and tracking the ebb and flow of balance of power dynamics in the West Pacific, and secondly, Britain’s contribution to strengthening America’s alliance networks in the region, principally through an overview of Britain’s evolving security alliance with Japan, as well as trilateral UK-US-Japan security arrangements. We will seek to demonstrate that while Britain’s engagement in the region has escalated quantitatively and qualitatively since the 2018 tabling of the “Global Britain” report, European intervention has been relatively irresolute, of limited impact, and unable to adapt effectively to the region’s shifting geostrategic realities. We will also briefly consider whether bilateral efforts between China and Taiwan to reduce tension might offer a model for increasing the UK’s own security engagement with Taiwan.

Growing Tensions Across the Taiwan Strait and Taiwan’s Evolving Perspective on Regional Security

The scale of the threats currently facing Taiwan’s national security is arguably the largest it has been in several decades.²

After a marked warming in cross-strait relations during the presidency in Taiwan of the Ma Ying-jeou administration (2008–2016), the subsequent election and reelection of Tsai Ing-wen in 2016 and 2020 has been met with considerable hostility in Zhongnanhai. Although the legacy of mistrust and suspicion between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait has always been strong, hitherto both sides had been prepared to make efforts to build and cultivate practical interactions to serve mutual interests. Even
under the pro-independence administration of Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008), for example, cross-strait visits and trade and investment with the mainland had steadily increased and the security situation remained relatively peaceful and stable even though Beijing turned a cold shoulder towards President Chen’s cross-strait policies.

By contrast, while the Tsai administration, like that of Chen, has refused to acknowledge the so-called 1992 consensus, which implies that both sides of the strait agree that there is only “one China” but have different interpretations as to what this means, this time Beijing has reacted by cutting off the channels of communication between the two sides. This has been a serious setback to managing the implementation of the twenty-three bilateral agreements previously signed and has also fuelled suspicion and misunderstanding. The negative impact of shutting down normal communication channels has been compounded by the policies towards both Beijing and Taipei of the US Government under President Trump. 2020 has seen a worrying escalation in tension, with both sides adopting a harder line and more bellicose rhetoric.

In the lead-up to the 2020 presidential election, President Tsai highlighted unrest in Hong Kong to argue that China’s claims to sovereignty over Taiwan pose a growing threat to the latter’s freedoms, advertised a raft of new and ambitious defence acquisitions, and claimed to be the president who has “placed the greatest emphasis on defence.” Immediately after the election, Tsai proclaimed that “Taiwan is already independent”—a statement scouting the periphery of China’s red line of “claiming independence.” China has, in turn, responded firmly. Released in May, the seventh annual work report under China’s current chairman Xi Jinping’s tenure removed for the first time references to “peaceful reunification.” Moreover, partially facilitated by the withdrawal of US naval assets from the region due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the last few months have witnessed a marked uptick in PLA exercises near Taiwan. This included incursions in Taiwan’s airspace and an incident when several PLA Air Force (PLAAF) aircraft crossed the median line between Taiwan and China. There was also another alleged incident where a PLAAF jet turned on its targeting radar.

While the recent deterioration of the cross-strait relationship has heightened tensions, it could be argued that the intensity, temporal proximity and nature of the primary threats to Taiwan’s national security are being altered by other concurrent factors. The first is the growing sense that China’s extensive investment in economic incentives, soft power and
united front work in Taiwan has failed to translate into the political and public relations outcomes Beijing would have preferred. For instance, partly due to the flailing demographic strength of the generation of mainland born migrants that fled to Taiwan with the Kuomintang, the number of Taiwanese who prefer to regard themselves as “Chinese” has been reported to stand at a mere 2.4%. Furthermore, those who regard themselves as both Taiwanese and Chinese reached a new low of 27.5% in mid-2020 (from a high of 46.5% in 1992). In terms of voters’ views on reunification, less than 1% of respondents participating in the 2020 survey stated that they would prefer unification to occur “as soon as possible,” while the last two years have featured a steep fall in the number of respondents favouring gradual unification (now at 5.1%) and increases in both categories supporting independence.

While Chinese officials have continued to claim that they believe “time is on their side,” the number of respondents supporting “maintaining the status quo,” as a means to gradually move towards independence, has almost doubled over the last two years (it now sits at 27%). Furthermore, the demography more open to unification—and that supports the China-friendly opposition Kuomintang party—continues to decline. Reflecting the impact such developments may have upon cross-strait tensions, as one analyst noted, “If the economic and political approach doesn’t work, what’s left is the military approach.” In less absolute terms, Beijing may be tempted to change the formulae or hard/soft power mix of its approach to achieving “reunification,” meaning a relative shift away from a preference for soft power, incentivisation and persuasion—measures which have hitherto seen limited success—and an increased investment in measures that leverage hard power, threats and coercion.

The second factor that is changing the nature of Taiwan’s security concerns relates to the evolving security relationship between Taiwan and the United States, and new links between Beijing’s aspirations for the reunification of Taiwan and for reshaping the strategic architecture of the western Pacific more generally. Aside from threatening Taiwan with war should it formally claim independence, Beijing has recently placed growing emphasis on warning that “seeking support from the US and [creating trouble] by taking advantage of the rivalry and competition between China and the US” is a new red line. Nevertheless, it could be argued that both China and the United States and its allies are increasingly approaching the “Taiwan problem” through the lens of the great
power game, and more specifically, intensifying competition to establish hegemony in East Asia and the western Pacific in particular.

On this point, recent Taiwanese reports reflect a growing view that China’s ambitions for absorbing Taiwan—typically advertised under the slogan of the “Chinese dream” of restoring Chinese territorial integrity—are increasingly being guided by China’s “strong military dream/superpower dream.” The first step of this is to secure the first island chain, of which Taiwan is a part, in order to control access to the Yellow Sea, East Asian Sea and the South China Sea.  

On the American side, while General Douglas MacArthur’s description of Taiwan as an “unsinkable aircraft carrier” was made in the backdrop of the battle to contain communism, a 2010 report by the US Taiwan Business Council emphasised the evolving significance of Taiwan for resisting potential efforts emanating from China to establish a “cordon sanitaire, or sphere of exclusive influence, in East Asia”—especially along and around the first island chain. More recently, Taiwan has also featured more prominently in discussions on America’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” (FOIP)—which emphasises protecting the region’s “rules-based order” and challenging actions from China, in particular, that may threaten the region’s security, openness and self-determination. Increasingly, references to Taiwan concerning this strategy have shifted from its status as a nation whose freedoms and democratic institutions should be protected under this banner, to its potential role as a contributor to the FOIP strategy. In line with this, America’s commitment to its ally has been unquestionably firm against the backdrop of growing Chinese bellicosity.  

The impact of these two factors has arguably been reflected not only in the ongoing escalation of Chinese military provocations and bellicose rhetoric directed at Taiwan but also their evolving nature. Chinese aircraft carriers have engaged in a number of operations around Taiwan since Tsai took office, with analysts surmising that an exercise involving its two aircraft carriers planned to be held in August 2020 was part of a rehearsal for a possible future assault on Taiwan’s Dongsha Islands. In addition to naval incursions, the last few years have seen an escalation in intrusions on Taiwan’s airspace, with ten occurring in June 2020 alone—surpassing the total number of incursions in the first five months of the year. Increasingly, PLA/AF incursions have appeared to be in response to American military operations near Taiwan, as opposed to political events/military developments within Taiwan.
Balance of Power and Taiwan’s Strategic Predicament

These developments reflect the rapidly evolving nature of the threat that China poses to Taiwan’s security. Arguably the most significant stems from a partial shift from rhetoric that frames the “Taiwan issue” as a Chinese domestic concern, to a growing propensity on both sides to frame it within the context of great power competition—a development which arguably reflects the growth of China as a regional power. It has perhaps long been the case that the balance across the Taiwan Strait has been lost. This point has been belatedly acknowledged in Taiwan through the development of Overall Defence Concept (OCD), which was first outlined in 2017 by Taiwan’s former Chief of General Staff, Admiral Lee Hsi-ming, and which emphasises the strengthening of asymmetric defence capabilities.20 However, to the extent to which shifts in the balance of power across the Taiwan Strait have made America’s Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) an even more essential pillar of Taiwan’s national security, the greater concern for Taiwan is that American hegemony in the region is now being challenged. Thus, the balance of power between China and the United States at the regional level may itself be shifting.21 Taiwan, moreover, is appearing to assume an increasingly important strategic role in this tussle for regional hegemony. Anxieties over the implications of both of these developments for Taiwan’s security have heightened considerably since 2019 when a series of war game simulations conducted by the RAND Corporation found that America would likely be defeated if it attempted to defend Taiwan from a Chinese invasion by 2030, and possibly earlier.22

The danger to Taiwan of a scenario in which China is the ascendant power in the western Pacific is profound. The profundity of this extends beyond the threat that China would be better positioned to invade Taiwan and succeed. The more significant problem is that Chinese control over the seas and airspace of the western Pacific would make available to China a wider array of coercive measures for degrading Taiwan’s sovereignty or national security. Beijing may prefer these options on the grounds that their economic, diplomatic and military costs are likely to be comparatively modest. To the extent that a combination of firm Chinese resolve and military superiority in the region creates the perception that the “reunification” of Taiwan is a fait accompli, Taiwan could be coerced to give ground on the issue of sovereignty—possibly even from a US administration reluctant to be dragged into a conflict it may lose.23
A shift in power away from the United States and its allies could also open other options that span a wider spectrum between moderate forms of Chinese coercion and more dramatic forms of kinetic action, which could be selected according to different cost thresholds. Among them is applying the much-discussed “salami-slicing” approach—a strategy currently associated with China’s approach to making incremental territorial expansions in the South China Sea—to strengthen sovereignty claims over small sections of Taiwanese airspace/maritime territory.24 Such a move, if successful, would make Taiwan’s de facto independence less tenable by strengthening China’s area-denial capabilities, which could give China the facility to oversee an embargo of the island. Nevertheless, in the event that China achieves region-wide hegemony, Beijing may not even need to invade Taiwanese territory to achieve this outcome—it could alternatively apply an embargo/area denial to stretches of the sea outside of Taiwan’s territorial waters that are vital to the island’s defence and economy. One such area is the South China Sea.

Nowhere is the fear that the shifting balance of power is positioning China to control access to the region’s non-territorial waters or global commons more acute and immediate than here. Consequently, Chinese unilateral actions, such as the construction and militarisation of man-made islands, are prompting growing concern that it could gain control over some of the world’s most strategically and economically vital sea lanes and restrict freedom of navigation through them. Chinese control over maritime transit in the western Pacific would give it a stronger hand to adopt a wide inventory of hard power measures to compromise or degrade Taiwan’s sovereignty. Control over the South China Sea would also help China deny theatre access to the American navy or implement an embargo should it attempt to invade Taiwan. Yet short of that, it will give China the enormous advantage of being able to exert greater control over Taiwan’s economic destiny. Trade through the South China Sea is vital to Taiwan’s maritime trade, and its capacity to meet its energy needs in particular.25 Measures such as blockades, harassment, constructing and enforcing administrative hurdles (such as establishing air defence identification zones) or regulating maritime trade volumes (a capacity that could be extended to air freight) could be used punitively or pre-emptively to influence political outcomes on the island. While hitherto unprecedented, this strategy would be in line with previous Chinese efforts to exert political influence by adjusting the numbers of mainland tourists visiting the island.26 On the more moderate side, mild versions of this strategy
would equip China to counter Tsai’s efforts to reduce reliance on China and increase the island’s resilience through increasing and diversifying trade with Southeast Asian nations and transforming Taiwan into a global logistics centre—two core tenets of Tsai’s signature New Southbound Policy.27

This brings us back to the issue of the relationship between Brexit and Taiwanese perspectives on regional security. The soft power deterrents available to the European Union are likely to be most potent in mitigating acts of naked aggression, such as a direct military assault on the island. However, the defence of Taiwan is not a first-order defence priority for Europe. Moreover, if China attains hegemony in the western Pacific, it will have numerous options to degrade the sovereignty of Taiwan in ways that are unlikely to prompt strong punitive economic measures among states eager to retain access to the world’s second-largest economy. Such a supposition leads one to tentatively conclude that while Brexit may weaken the European Union, the more significant question for Taiwan is what direct impact it will have on geostrategic competition between America and its allies on the one hand, and China on the other, in the western Pacific in particular. A specific question that has special pertinence is how Brexit will affect the scale and efficacy of efforts by foreign powers to push back against unilateral attempts to expand China’s territorial waters and develop the facility to control navigation in and around the first island chain.

With this in mind, we forecast that Brexit’s impact is overall likely to be positive for Taiwan’s security. The current US policy appears to envisage a two-pronged strategy for heading off China’s march to regional hegemony, involving internal rebalancing through upscaling and upgrading conventional naval warfare capabilities, and external rebalancing through widening and strengthening the integrity of American alliances. 28 Since around the time of the Brexit referendum, Britain has answered this call by conducting freedom of navigation (FONOP) and flyover operations in the South China Sea. Furthermore, it has entered into trilateral agreements with the United States and Japan, which have emphasised a shared commitment to protecting freedom of navigation and—in an indirect reference to China’s unilateral maritime territorial claims—the protection of the rules-based global order. One scholar in the region has argued that although post-Brexit Britain is playing a more active role “East of Suez” to participate in American efforts to hold in check actions by China (and Russia) that threaten the rules-based order, the “not to be slighted naval
powers that are Britain and Japan joining forces with America” could mean that “the already powerful naval capacity [of the current alliance] centred around America will become even more powerful.” This would be a development that would likely represent a strategic gain for Taiwan.\textsuperscript{29}

**Britain’s Engagement in South China Sea Territorial Disputes**

While competing territorial claims over the waters and reefs in the South China Sea have been a cause of friction for much of the post-World War II period, China’s approach to its claims began to harden appreciably around the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century. In May 2009, it submitted a map to the United Nation’s Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) with a “Nine-Dash line” that incorporated the South China Sea. It stated in the submission to which it was appended that “China has indisputable sovereignty over the islands of the South China Sea and the adjacent waters, and enjoys sovereign jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof.”\textsuperscript{30} In March 2010, Chinese representatives reportedly claimed that the South China Sea is a “core interest” of China on par with Tibet. In 2013 a publisher under the jurisdiction of the PRC’s State Bureau of Surveying and Mapping published an officially state-sanction “ten-dashed” map—the tenth dash being added around Taiwan, which brought to the fore a new connection between territorial claims in the South China Sea and others in the East China Sea.\textsuperscript{31} In February that year, China announced that it would neither participate in, nor respect the ruling of, the case brought to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague by the Philippines challenging China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea. The following November, China unilaterally declared an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea, which covered islands claimed by Taiwan and Japan. On the back of China’s occupation of the Scarborough Shoal, that same year saw Chinese vessels undertake oil exploration in Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone, and a growing number of run-ins between fishing boats and customs vessels in disputed waters. From December 2013 to October 2015, China constructed artificial islands spanning a combined total of 3,000 acres on seven coral reefs located in the South China Sea. Despite assurances to the contrary from China’s President Xi Jinping, it soon began militarising them, creating what has been called a “Great Wall of Sand” featuring
ports, hangers and military-grade airstrips, radar installations, anti-aircraft batteries/missiles and anti-ship missiles, and fuel/ammunition reserves.\footnote{32}

Prior to the Brexit referendum, the UK’s responses to China’s island-building initiatives were mainly in the form of contributions to a united front by Western, in particular European, governments, and were mostly manifest through joint communiques and principled statements, such as the G-7 Foreign Ministers’ Declaration of Maritime Security (we discuss this below). However, starting from the lead-up to the Brexit vote, Britain began to respond to China’s territorial claims more independently, and with increasing firmness. There were three identifiable stages in this process, beginning with this pre-Brexit period marked primarily by the UK’s participation in joint communiques. This was followed by the period roughly coinciding with the lead-up and aftermath of the Brexit referendum, in which Britain began voicing firm commitments to act to curtail unilateral actions. This was in turn followed by an escalation from rhetoric to action, whose initiation roughly coincided with the formal parliamentary release of the Global Britain policy vision.

\textit{Joint Communiques and ‘Principled Statements’ (2014–2015)}

American and European attention to emerging security challenges in the South China Sea began to escalate in the mid-2010s. Notable in the response was a high level of solidarity and a tendency to speak with one voice—often through statements of joint principles and communiques—on a number of shared concerns. Foremost among these were concerns about China’s construction of artificial islands in the Paracel and Spratly island chains during 2014 and 2015. These, it was feared, would lay the foundations for Beijing to unilaterally draw new territorial water limits that could constrain other nations’ rights to freedom of navigation in that strategically vital region. China’s refusal to respect the jurisdiction of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the case initiated against it by the Philippines in February 2013 also raised concerns as it was viewed as posing a challenge to the integrity and credibility of the rules-based-order. Britain’s early response to these events was primarily as a signatory to statements and joint communiques produced jointly with other Western powers, notable the EU and G7, and that reiterated signatories’ strong commitment to “freedom of navigation” and an “international maritime order based upon the principles of international law, in particular as reflected in UNCLOS.”\footnote{33}
By the lead-up to the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s ruling on the South China Sea Arbitration Case in early 2016, the UK began speaking out more regularly and stridently. A notable development was the shift from a mostly neutral tone to rebukes explicitly and implicitly directed at Chinese actions. In a visit in early January 2016 to the Philippines, Philip Hammond, the then British foreign secretary, asserted that freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea was “non-negotiable” and a “red line.”34 In mid-March, the Beijing British Embassy website published the European Union declaration condemning the “deployment of military forces or equipment on disputed maritime features which… may threaten freedom of navigation,” and that reiterated support for a “rules-based regional and international order.”35 On 19 April, as the likely outcome of the arbitration was becoming more apparent—and in the knowledge that Beijing had refused to respect the outcome of the arbitration ruling—Hugo Swire, then the British minister of state responsible for East Asia, stated that “Under the international rules-based system on which the world depends, we would expect the ruling from The Hague to be adhered to by all parties concerned.”36 In the lead-up to the 42nd summit of the G7 in Japan in late May, then Prime Minister David Cameron was more direct: “We want to encourage China to be part of that rules-based world. We want to encourage everyone to abide by these adjudications.”37

After the Brexit vote, which roughly corresponded with China’s anticipated rejection of the finding of the arbitration ruling in July 2016, a noticeable change began to occur in the UK’s rhetoric, from expressions of concern to commitments to concrete actions such as FONOPs (Freedom of Navigation Operations). In early December 2016, shortly before the official release of reports of rapid militarisation of reefs in the Spratly Islands, Britain’s ambassador to the United States, Kim Darroch, reiterated Britain’s commitment to “keep air routes open and keep sea routes open,” and announced that British fighter planes would fly over the South China Sea on the way to Japan. He also said that Britain would commit to sending its new aircraft carriers, the 65,000 tonne HMS Queen Elizabeth and sister ship HMS Prince of Wales to the Pacific after they entered service.38

The shift in rhetoric was immediately noted in China, with the state news agency Xinhua stating “Such remarks create the impression that
London may soon deviate from a largely aloof attitude over the South China Sea issue and start playing a meddling role there like the United States and Japan. Soon after China threatened Vietnam for planning oil drilling operations within its 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone in mid-2017, British Defence Minister Michael Fallon announced that Britain planned to send a warship and “won’t be constrained by China from sailing through the South China Sea,” a pledge that was repeated by his successor eighteen months later. As foreign secretary, Britain’s current Prime Minister Boris Johnson reiterated the commitment to send the UK’s “colossal” aircraft carriers to the region during a visit to Australia in July 2017.

**From Words to Action (2018–)**

Up to this point, the UK’s increasingly firm rhetoric was rarely matched by action. This was to change in 2018. As noted by Bob Wang in Chapter 4, in June of that year, Britain participated in a French FONOP operation near the Mischief, Subi and Fiery Cross reefs in the Spratly Islands. Then in late August, the 19,500-ton amphibious transport vessel, HMS Albion, conducted a FONOP in waters near the Paracel Islands soon after one by the frigate HMS Sutherland, prompting immediate and firm rebukes from Chinese officials. And on 9 December 2019 the survey ship HMS Enterprise sailed through the Taiwan Strait. While the COVID-19 crisis saw a pause in activities, Britain was still due to dispatch at least one of its Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers to the western Pacific in 2021.

**Brexit’s Impact on East Asian Security**

*Augmenting the US-Led Regional Alliance*

Several factors can explain the recent escalation of Britain’s engagement in East Asian and Southeast Asian security issues. One of the most important is China’s growing propensity to engage in unilateral actions to expand its maritime boundaries across vital trade routes. Not only have these actions defied the normative prescriptions of the rules-based order, but they arguably pose an indirect threat to its very viability. This is particularly threatening to an island nation highly dependent on maritime trade for its prosperity. The shift from a rules-based order to one in which hard
power determines the outcomes of territorial disputes poses an additional threat to the UK as its maritime territory is disproportionate to both its geography and naval capacity. A further illustration might be the fact that Britain is responsible for a greater expanse of the world’s oceans than Brazil, Canada or China. Including the Overseas Territories, the UK’s “maritime estate” covers 2.6 million square miles—an area more than twice the size of India. With the cooperation of the Overseas Territories, the Government plans to safeguard 1.5 million square miles of ocean with a “Blue Belt” of marine protected areas by 2020.\footnote{44} Furthermore, one of most grave challenges facing “sea states”—including, presumably, the small island territories of former colonies—is not only “restrictions on the right to use the seas” but “the creeping continentalisation of maritime space,” of which China’s island-building operations in the South China Sea are so far providing a successful model.\footnote{45}

Brexit has arguably accentuated these concerns. A core challenge associated with it was the conundrum as to how Britain would offset potential losses in trade with European Union nations through expanding trade opportunities further afield, mainly through maritime trade. Moreover, on the geostrategic front, questions arose as to how Britain could offset potential losses in global influence brought about by its separation from the European Union by expanding its presence and alliances “East of Suez.” The “Global Britain” vision linked these concerns with a growing aspiration for deeper engagement with East and Southeast Asia; a region of the world identified for its enormous economy and growth potential, as well as growing global influence. The juxtaposition of post-Brexit Britain’s ambitions to increase its engagement with the region and its recognition of the dangers posed by China’s unilateral actions in the region both to this ambition and Britain’s interests elsewhere are emphasised in government documents, and reports by British-based think tanks. While cautious not to paint China as an adversary, the 2018 *National Security Capability Review* (NSCR) included a sub-section titled “Global Britain” which stated “Global Britain means the UK as an open, inclusive and outward-facing free-trading global power playing a leading role on the world stage... We are championing free trade and the international rules-based system.” This was followed immediately by the observation that “Economic growth in Asia is moving the global centre of gravity east. Meanwhile, some states are actively destabilising the world order to their own ends, claiming that the rules and standards we have built, and
the values on which they rest, no longer apply." This report also emphasised the growing importance of maintaining, and building upon, Britain’s defence/security presence and alliances in the Asia/Pacific region.

Another key document outlining the core tenets of the Global Britain vision, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee Global Britain Sixth Report of Session 2017–19, is less shy in identifying threats to Britain’s interests in Asia, emphasising that while Britain would like to upscale its economic relationship with the emerging superpower, Global Britain faces ongoing challenges posed by “an increasingly assertive China,” and will remain “robust in defending our position on areas of difference, including... the South China Sea.” On this point, the former document mentions the importance of maintaining the “rules-based” international and global order on 12 occasions and the later 14, making this one of the most emphasised themes in both documents. While more measured in tone, the language used to discuss this point in both documents is not dissimilar to that used in the aforementioned rebukes of U.K. government representatives that were directed explicitly or implicitly at China’s actions in the South China Sea.

From a Taiwanese perspective, what is arguably most positive about post-Brexit Britain’s apparent commitment to challenging China’s unilateral actions in the region is its emphasis on multilateralism, in particular, its potential effect of augmenting the US regional alliance. In terms of FONOP’s, Britain’s nascent yet strengthening embrace of the ship-rider (or “bilateral ship”) and multiple hulls programme strategy has a precedent in attaching Royal Navy helicopters to French operations near the Spratly Islands. Britain has also stated that it is open to hosting US Navy F35B Lightning fighters on future aircraft carrier deployments in the western Pacific. On this point, Britain’s growing cooperation with allies in the region, and the strength of its coordination and interoperability with partners, is a multiplying factor in terms of Britain’s impact on regional security. British officials have already expressed an openness to operating its carriers with coalition partner escorts, and this flexibility means that potent capabilities can be deployed “East of Suez” on a more sustainable basis and without unduly compromising Britain’s defence capabilities in the Atlantic. More importantly from a Taiwanese perspective, Britain’s coordination with allies means that its commitment need not be large to have a substantial impact, especially in relation to American efforts to retain the balance of power. As noted by Toshi Yoshihara, from the Washington Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments:
[it] would signal that Beijing cannot continue to advance its maritime ambitions in a resistance-free environment. Even a modest British contribution would help to maintain a favourable balance of naval power in the south China sea, reinforcing the message that Beijing confronts a coalition of the world’s most capable navies. The more friction the PRC encounters, the more likely it will think twice about challenging the rules-based system, thus shoring up deterrence. 51

Further examples of the UK’s multilateral approach are found in its growing investment in regional security and defence partnerships such as the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) (a series of defence arrangements between Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia), and, as David Warren mentions in Chapter 6, the rapid expansion of its cooperation in security and defence with Japan, as well as trilateral arrangements involving Britain, Japan and the United States. In 2012—a year in which Japan’s security concerns were heightened by a “semi-official” Chinese campaign to cast doubt over Japan’s sovereignty over the Ryukyu Islands, and a significant increase in territorial incursions around the Senkaku, or Diaoyutai Islands, the U.K and Japan signed a memorandum on defence cooperation. 52 In October 2013, Prime Minister Abe highlighted the apparent new emphasis on strengthened cooperation in defence and security in a speech coinciding with the UK-Japan Strategic Dialogue. As with Britain’s engagement in the South China Sea, developments accelerated from around the time of the Brexit referendum. Both sides co-signed a number of important new agreements including a defence-related logistics treaty in January 2017, and most importantly, the Japan-UK Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation on 31 August that year. 53 This expanded on the scope of the 2012 memorandum, listing the priorities for cooperation as regular joint exercises, “defence equipment and technology transfer,” the free exchange of strategic assessments and related intelligence, and an ongoing commitment to regular communication across all levels. By 2018—the year in which Britain released its “Global Britain” parliamentary report—one author claimed that UK-Japanese defence cooperation had become “full spectrum” across all domains of warfare, with a leading emphasis on maritime security. 54 Especially pertinent to Taiwan’s regional security interests is both nations’ commitment to “promote concrete collaboration in assistance for capacity-building of developing countries in Southeast Asia… in areas such as maritime security.” This is a commitment that
could see the bilateral agreement as the launching pad for a broader, loose coalition of states more directly concerned about the impact of the unilateral actions of China on their territorial integrity, access to resources and freedom of navigation across vital trade lines.

Nevertheless, perhaps most pertinent to Taiwan is that this cooperation is arguably playing a pivotal role in strengthening a new regional focus for Anglo-American naval cooperation, and the nascent incorporation of the British navy in a western Pacific theatre defence coalition, by prompting a series of trilateral agreements and operations. Four months after the Brexit referendum, the heads of each nation’s navy signed a UK-US-Japan Trilateral Agreement at the Pentagon which outlined aims for “a common vision of enhancing the operational effectiveness of our maritime forces through increased cooperation.” This envisages strengthened cooperation through joint exercises and patrol operations and commitments to collectively maintaining freedom of navigation.\(^{55}\) This was followed in 2019 by a trilateral joint statement, pledging that each nation’s forces will continue to cooperate in combating “attempts to circumscribe freedom of navigation; the very foundation of the trade that is now the lifeblood of the global economic system.” It also noted, more interestingly, that the three nations cannot be expected to shoulder the burden of facing global challenges alone and that others that it should be shared by others who value and “adhere to the international rules-based system.”\(^ {56}\) Accompanying joint exercises and operations included trilateral anti-submarine exercises in December 2018 and March 2019.\(^ {57}\)

**Conclusion**

Even if Brexit weakens the European Union or “Western solidarity” in a broader sense, from the unique strategic predicament of Taiwan, Brexit, and even more so the Global Britain vision, could prompt certain positive developments in the security situation in East Asia/the western Pacific. Hitherto, Europe has been largely impotent in challenging, let alone curtailing, unilateral actions by China that threaten freedom of navigation both within, and indirectly beyond, the South China Sea. And as a “normative” and “civilian” power, Europe has also been reluctant to acknowledge the futility of retaining a focus on “process-oriented norms” for dealing with territorial disputes when a claimant has refused participation in arbitration, and obviated the very necessity of attaining
de jure sovereignty, through installing access denial facilities on man-made maritime fortresses. While Brexit may further weaken the European Union’s influence, post-Brexit Britain’s pivot “East of Suez,” and in East Asia/Southeast Asia in particular, is serving to augment American hard power in the region at the very moment that the US Pacific Fleet is both challenging, and facing unprecedented challenges from, a rising and increasingly assertive China. Compared to its effect on the EU, Brexit’s impact on US hard power in the region is the more heavily weighted factor from a Taiwanese perspective—especially if the post-COVID-19 world is to see a continuing shift from liberalism back towards neo-realism.

On its own, this can, therefore, be seen as a positive, if limited, British response to Bob Wang’s plea in Chapter 4 for the UK, United States and EU to work together more to support Taiwan against Chinese intimidation and coercion. Nevertheless, might Britain go further—could its increasing commitment to engage in security issues in the region through its nascent quasi-membership in a western Pacific American-led alliance translate into a willingness to join America in defending Taiwan in the event of Chinese aggression? On this point, it can be noted that while the “golden era” of Sino-British relations is likely over—with Britain’s response to the imposition of Hong Kong’s National Security Laws, and later its decision to ban Huawei from having any role in building Britain’s 5G networks—China remains an important market for the UK. Thus, Taiwan (as with East Asia more generally) remains at best a secondary defence priority. Arguably a more obtainable but nonetheless warmly welcomed outcome for Taiwan would be that Britain’s growing investment in the retention of American hegemony in the region would prompt it to adopt a position of strategic ambiguity on the Taiwan issue.

While this might be a step too far at present for British policymakers, there are measures towards this that could be taken, paradoxically perhaps, drawing from Taiwan’s own experience with China. As far back as 2003, when Chinese distrust of the Chen Shui-bian administration in Taipei was high, and in an attempt to prevent cross-strait tensions from growing, Taipei, Beijing and Washington jointly organised a trilateral track-two dialogue mechanism. Although formally based around think tanks, the participants were close to each government’s top decision-makers so they could relay clear and accurate messages to their counterparts and refer responses back to their respective authorities. The setting and trustworthy atmosphere among participants delivered real
benefits in transmitting and referring important and accurate messages from policy-makers so as to avoid misunderstanding and miscalculation. Even though formal cross-strait exchanges were suspended, the equilibrium of the security environment in the strait area was maintained. Arguably, such a mechanism is even more critical now.

This also offers a model for consultations and cooperation between the UK and Taiwan. As long as the UK maintains its formal position of not recognising Taiwan as a state, government to government consultations or cooperation will not happen. However, as has been shown above, the UK and Taiwan have overlapping security interests in the western Pacific, not to mention significant trade and investment links. An institutionalised track-two security dialogue mechanism between the two would facilitate more efficient and effective exchanges without transgressing Chinese “red lines” over defence cooperation. There are several precedents, including the Shangri-La Dialogue (in which Taiwan used to participate) or China’s own Boao Forum, while the UK’s Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) has already held a dialogue with Taiwanese counterparts for many years. The practical benefits appear considerable, the only obstacles being political will.

Notes

1. Daisuke Ikemoto has opined that Japan “sees Brexit as a potential threat to the solidarity of the Western Alliance,” (113) and asserts that Brexit, in conjunction with the United States allegedly being “no longer willing to play the same role of the world’s policeman,” (114) has combined to heighten anxieties around China’s territorial ambitions in East and South East Asia. See Daisuke Ikemoto, ‘Is the Western Alliance Crumbling? A Japanese Perspective on Brexit,’ in The Implications of Brexit for East Asia, ed. David W.F. Huang and Michael Reilly (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 113–127. A Korean view can be found in Si-hong Kim, ‘EU Geullboel Jeollyakgwasa Han-Eu Gwangye’ 글로벌 전략과 한-Eu관계 [The European Union Global Strategy (EUGS) and Korean-EU Relations], Yureobyongu 유럽연구 [The Journal of Contemporary European Studies] 35, no. 3 (August 2017): 29–53. According to Kim, while “considerable progress had been made in the areas of security and defence in the comparatively short time period” (39) in the European Union despite Brexit, “It is also true that the EU and its member states have more than a few doubts about whether [they] have the capacity to restrain China’s intentions and actions in the South China Sea” (41).
2. See, for instance, Ian Easton, ‘Ian Easton on Taiwan: America Should Put Military Forces in Taiwan,’ *Taipei Times*, 9 March 2020, https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2020/03/09/2003732335; ‘Taiwan: Concern Grows Over China’s Invasion Threat,’ *Financial Times*, 8 January 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/e3462762-3080-11ea-9703-ec0cae3f0de2; Yimou Lee, ‘Chinese Military Threat on the Rise, Taiwan Foreign Minister Warns,’ NASDAQ, 22 July 2020, https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/chinese-military-threat-on-the-rise-taiwan-foreign-minister-warns-2020-07-22. For a more detailed but slightly older assessment see Michael S. Chase, ‘Averting a Cross-Strait Crisis,’ Council on Foreign Relations, 26 February 2019, https://www.cfr.org/report/averting-cross-strait-crisis.

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