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Geopolitics

“Global Britain ”, “AUKUS”, etc. Anglosphere supremacism and the promised wars in the China Sea

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There are the ongoing wars (Yemen has been the most enduring and disastrous theatre of operations since 2014), the impending disasters (on the Ukrainian frontier) as these lines are written, and the conflagrations that have been prepared on a vast scale and for a long time, but whose extreme dangers are becoming clearer in a deceptive quasi-silence. The rise of tensions in the China Sea and the role that Australia and Great Britain will play there post-Brexit, alongside the United States, are the typical examples of the moment.

The end of summer 2021 was marked by two major military and diplomatic crises: the hasty departure of American and British troops from Afghanistan and Australia's breach of the contract (worth 55 billion euros) signed in 2016 with France for the construction of twelve submarines. The first of these two events inflicted on the first military power an ultimate humiliation after twenty years of blindness and devastation. Its British deputy, meanwhile, exemplified its incomparable sense of tradition by adding a new Afghan rout to a long and lamentable imperial and warlike history in that country. But the episode was the occasion for an additional confirmation: British global power policy – so crucially displayed, however, in the immediately post-Brexit period – remains very largely at the mercy of American strategic choices, whatever were the pleas of Boris Johnson (and Tony Blair) against the evacuation decision.

A dual military-diplomatic crisis

The second episode was, to a certain extent, a counterpoint to the first: the breach of the contract between Australia and France was the real birth certificate of a new security pact between Australia (A), the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US): AUKUS. For the United States and Australia, this new alliance adds an (additional) military dimension to their "dialogue" already underway within the framework of the "Quad", an informal partnership formed in 2007 (and reactivated in 2017) involving the US , Australia, India and Japan in a new scenario of encirclement of China.

For post-Brexit Britain, the interest is threefold. First, the renegotiation of the contract offers significant industrial benefits for the Rolls Royce factories and for the arms giant, BAE Systems . Secondly, this partnership seems to open up new possibilities for the Johnson government after the disappointments of recent years and the absence of any serious opening for the great trade agreement between the United Kingdom and the United States, so desired and announced by Johnson (neither Biden nor Trump before him seem to have taken any interest in such a project). Finally, and above all, with the AUKUS, the great post-Brexit redeployment project of British power policy seems to be taking a little more shape: “Global Britain”.

“Global Britain ”

“Global Britain” is first of all the title of an official British government document, published in March 2021: “Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy”. The Prime Minister presents in it his project for the United Kingdom by 2030: “Global Britain” announces a historic shift in foreign policy towards South-East Asia and the so-called "Indo-Pacific" zone [1], centred on a set of military priorities (with a strong increase in the defence budget [2]) defined above all in reaction to the growing role played by China in the region and in the world. According to Global Britain , “we will be the European partner with the largest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific, committed for the long term, based on close and deep bilateral and multilateral partnerships.” [3]

The leaders of the British state can now present themselves as proud restorers of a primary national historical vocation which the incapacitating tutelage of the EU had supposedly thwarted since the accession of the United Kingdom to the European Community in 1973. At the end of 2016, only a few months after the EU referendum, Boris Johnson, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, put it precisely in these terms in a speech delivered in Manama (Bahrain): by deciding to withdraw from its bases beyond Suez at the late 1960s, the Labour government of the day had made the mistake of giving up Britain's prestige and status as a global power; in 1972, just a year after withdrawing from the great naval and air force base of Singapore – the supreme symbol of British imperial and military influence in the world - Great Britain had signed its adhesion to the EEC, the supreme symbol of national capitulation, according to the current defenders of “Global Britain”. [4]

As Mehdi Boussebaa has clearly shown, “Global Britain” has become an expression that we see widely circulating in political, media and academic discourse. [5] This expression is also inseparable from another, the real slogan of this strategy: “East of Suez” is now the watchword of a vision of intense militarism bathed in the amber gleams of a perfectly senile imperial nostalgia, costly and already deadly (given the massive British logistical contribution to the Saudi war in Yemen – where France, of course, is not to be outdone). But all this is hardly surprising if we think of the mental world that this generation of politicians has, for many of them, inherited from their passage through Eton (the maximum version of British school elitism), where the exaltation of the imperialist heroism of yesteryear remains regularly on the curriculum. [6]

The break with Europe is thus meant to have opened the moment for a general redeployment beginning with a reconstruction of the strategic positions of yesteryear, in the Arabian peninsula to begin with.

In Bahrain in 2018 (i.e., 47 years after its withdrawal from the base it had in Bahrain until 1971), Britain has reopened a permanent military base, for £40m. The base can now accommodate 500 soldiers, sailors and pilots. This facility (Mina Salman Port) has been designed to be the Royal Navy's largest operations centre outside the UK.

In September 2020, the British Ministry of Defence announced an investment of £23.8 million for the expansion of the port of Duqm, in Oman, the capacity of which was thus to be tripled, according to the Ministry of Defence, “to facilitate Royal Navy deployments in the Indian Ocean”. Nothing new about that, when we take into account the long history linking the two monarchies and the degree of penetration of British power in the administration of this largely vassalized country. [7] But it remains to be seen how big will be the scale of this logistical network between Oman and the base in Brunei [8], passing through Diego Garcia, a British territory in the Indian Ocean, leased to the United States, which has installed there one of its main military bases in the world (of which, by the way, there are around 800 in 80 countries, among which several hundred are lined up opposite China). [9]

AUKUS, latest version of imperialist alliances in Southeast Asia

This now allows us to grasp the importance of a third event during the summer of 2021, which was not discussed in France. Between May and September, the British Carrier Strike Group (CSG), comprising an aircraft carrier, seven warships and a nuclear submarine, sailed from the English coast to the South China Sea, Japan, South Korea, then Guam, returning to Portsmouth in December. The CSG (in conjunction with a US strike group) thus visited forty countries and organized dozens of joint military exercises in a demonstration of military and diplomatic alliances, in the name of attachment to “our democratic values”, to “the rule of law” and to an “international rules-based order” in the face of a Chinese power presented as the negation of all that.

This naval expedition, which did not fail to arouse expressions of the most grandiloquent nationalism, showed in practice what “Global Britain” could mean “east of Suez”. In addition to its important diplomatic dimension, its staging provided first of all a counterpoint to the prolonged failure in Afghanistan and then to the humiliation of the exit from it.

Let us also think about the advertising vocation of the CSG, a travelling showcase for a state which happens to be the second arms seller in the world [10], far behind the United States, but clearly ahead of Russia and France. A high-ranking officer put it bluntly: "We think there is a market for a more persistent presence of the British army (in Asia)." [11] The new AUKUS alliance has therefore come very opportunely to support and consolidate the current neo-imperial militarist dynamic.

It should nevertheless be remembered that as such, the AUKUS is itself only the latest version of a set of older imperialist alliances in Southeast Asia, one of whose common aims was none other than stemming the influence of communist China and Vietnam in the region. We cannot go back over here on the unstable but continuous imbrication, during the 1950s and 1960s, of numerous organizations, alliances, partnerships and defence pacts between Malaya (later Malaysia), Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, then Indonesia from 1966 (following the extermination of the Indonesian communists), first under British imperial tutelage which, rapidly declining, was to give way to US hegemony. [12]

As Singaporean historian Wen-Qing Ngoei brilliantly explains, this history has generally been obscured and misunderstood due to an over-focus on the Vietnam War, seen out of its regional context, and which for many people seemed to mark a historic imperialist defeat in a vast and complex region, but seen through the prism of this single conflict. The result was a very misleading underestimation of what, on the contrary, was in fact the establishment of a lasting US imperial hegemony with the constitution of the "arc of containment" of communism in Southeast Asia, formed by Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia (who were at the origin of the Association of South East Asian Nations, ASEAN, in 1967). [13]

It is moreover quite remarkable, from this point of view, that the CSG notably took part in a joint exercise within the framework of the FPDA (Five Powers Defence Arrangement), concluded in 1970 between Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia, on the eve of the British withdrawal from Singapore. [14] The great British "maritime renaissance" therefore only reaffirmed a role as an auxiliary of American power within the framework of a solidly Anglosphere alliance, choosing a pro-US alignment with reckless zeal: the hope, or the chances – as you wish – of finding the world of yesteryear, "east of Suez", as we left it before the final curtain came down on the "Empire" 51 years ago, are pure backward-looking idylls, however exhilarating the crackling of the gramophone and the yellowed clichés of national-colonialist nostalgia may seem.

New dynamics of Chinese expansionism and reconfiguration of the world order

The threat of communist "contamination" is not exactly on the agenda and if China arouses or continues to attract mistrust or hostility from neighbouring nations, the situation is profoundly changed and contradictory: certainly the various modalities of rapid Chinese expansionism involve, among other things, the search for a vast territorial hold in the China Sea, with the claim of a maritime zone extending from Taiwan to the northern coasts of Borneo and Brunei (the "nine dot line"), encompassing various sets of islets (Paracel Islands, Nansha/Spratly Islands), sometimes militarized and partly claimed, some by Vietnam or Taiwan, others by the Philippines, Brunei or Malaysia. [15]

But the first consequence has been this: the growth of Chinese military capabilities over the past twenty years has recently led at least part of the US military elite to conclude that "US military superiority is no longer assured and the implications for US interests and for American security are serious." [16] These fears have more recently turned to dread following the successful test, during the summer of 2021, of a new Chinese supersonic weapons system. There was much talk, in this regard, of the "sputnik moment", in reference to the launch of the Soviet satellite in 1957 which, in the midst of the Cold War, seemed to reveal a disastrous technological and military retard for the US in the space race at the time.

But in this region taken as a whole, new and old fears and recriminations combine with the challenges represented by the gigantic growth of trade with China. One thinks, for example, of the sudden and massive increase in economic relations between China and the ASEAN countries (the great alliance of the anti-communist arc, established in 1967): between 2010 and 2020, foreign direct investment from China to the ASEAN countries increased by 100 per cent, making China the fourth source of FDI in this regional entity. Over the same period, the volume of ASEAN-China trade has doubled (China being ASEAN's largest trading partner, already since 2009) and has almost quadrupled since 2005 (the year of the entry into force of the ASEAN-China Trade and Goods Agreement). [17] We therefore understand the lack of unanimity, even the mistrust of ASEAN leaders (Malaysians, Indonesians) for the AUKUS, the latest manifestation of an endless arms race, turned towards the region, without taking account in the slightest the opinion of the first countries apparently concerned. [18]

But, in connection with the above, we also think of the scale of the investments undertaken by China within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, or “new silk roads”). In 2013, in Kazakhstan, Xi Jinping presented this vast project for the development of trade and transport infrastructure in some sixty countries. Four years later, in May 2017 in Beijing, he announced a budget of \$124 billion for the BRI which, moreover, was to be included in the constitution of the CCP itself (in October of the same year).

From the West African shores to New Zealand, to major port facilities in Djibouti and Sri Lanka, China seems capable of and poised to reconfigure nothing less than the world order. [19] Two further developments, apparently minor and among many others, seem emblematic of this dynamic: China is now the main trading partner of New Zealand, which sends 30 per cent of its exports there. This traditional component of pro-British and then pro-US alliances in the region recently opted out of the “Five Eyes Alliance”, the organization formed during the Cold War and intended to share classified intelligence between the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. If the latter country was not a major contributor to this 100 per cent Anglosphere alliance, its recent defection is no less symptomatic of the ambivalences and reorientations of the moment.

Another example: the vast Federation of the (four) States of Micronesia (600 islands) is placed under US military “protection” within the framework of a treaty expiring in 2023. With the decision of cooperation (in 2017) between Micronesia and China within the framework of the BRI [20] there appears to be the possibility of China replacing the US presence in at least part of the archipelago. [21] This possibility is all the more clear with the referendum in the Micronesian state of Chuuk (“Gibraltar of the Pacific”), scheduled for the month of March 2022.

The contemporary dynamics of China render largely obsolete, de facto, the pro-US anti-Chinese apparatus established during the Cold War and whose lease “Global Britain” and AUKUS claim to renew. Beijing has the financial, commercial, diplomatic and military means, and is in a position to exceed all that historical Anglosphere supremacy is able to offer on all of these grounds. There therefore remains for the latter, in a phase of visible decline, the disaster of the promised war which will allow it to maintain its domination, all in the name of the holy trinity of militarism, racism and imperialism. It remains to be seen how far this promise can be kept, even though experience in this area leaves little room for any optimism. The nature of Chinese expansionism – its authoritarian features, its possible recourse to the debt trap – remains to be characterized, while taking into account the new contradictions it is intended to induce. When Xi Ji-ping declared in 2014: “In the final analysis, it is up to the people of Asia to take charge of Asian affairs, to solve Asian problems and to defend Asian security” [22], one can legitimately speculate on whether “Asian people” means “Beijing dignitaries”. It remains that we are entitled to hear in the bidding of decrepit masters of the world, the groans of a certain order finally ending. The ultimate question being how not to end up along with them, neither there, nor here, nor elsewhere.

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[1] This term has been in use since 2010, to describe the needs of strategic alliances intended to exclude China (where this “concept” is rejected) from a space which happens to coincide with that of the Quad (“Quadrilateral dialogue”).

[2] With an expenditure of \$59.2 billion in 2020, the UK’s military budget has risen from 8th (in 2019) to 5th in the world.

[3] HM Government, March 2021, p. 65 [“Global Britain in a Competitive Age”](#).

[4] [“Foreign Secretary Speech: 'Britain is Back East of Suez'”](#), Manama Dialogue, Bahrain.

[5] Mehdi Boussebaa, “In the shadow of empire: Global Britain and the UK business school”, *Organization*, 27/3 (2019), p. 483-493,

[6] Cf. James Wood, *London Review of Books*, 41/13 (4 July 2019) [“These Etonians”](#).

[7] The investigative journalist Phil Miller, in his post for *Double Down News* 5 May 2021, explains it well: [“The Secret British Cabal That Proves Colonialism Never Ended”](#).

[8] Brunei, a small oil-rich sultanate north of Borneo, hosts the only permanent British base in the region. Able to accommodate 1,000 soldiers, it is maintained at the expense of the sultan himself.

[9] Diego Garcia is the main island of the Chagos Islands archipelago, which was taken by Great Britain from the Republic of Mauritius on the threshold of its independence. Its inhabitants were driven out between 1965 and 1973 in order to allow the installation of the US military base whose lease, which expired in 2016, was renewed until 2036, in the strictest disregard of international law, resolutions of the UN, and decisions of the International Court of Justice in favor of Mauritius.

[10] BBC, 6 October 2020 [“UK remains world's second-biggest arms dealer, figures suggest”](#).

[11] General Carleton-Smith, quoted by Phil Miller in *The Daily Maverick* 20 November 2020, [“Revealed: the UK military’s overseas base network involves 145 sites in 42 countries”](#).

[12] The best known of these pacts is probably the Asian equivalent of NATO, the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization, SEATO, established in 1954.

[13] Wen-Qing Ngoei, *Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States and Anticommunism in South-East Asia*, Singapore, ISEAS, 2019.

[14] British Embassy, Bangkok, July 23, 2021 [“UK carrier strike group in the Indo-Pacific”](#).

[15] Faced with – as a reminder – more than 120 US military bases in Japan, nearly a hundred in South Korea, new projects for additional bases in Guam, the Mariana Islands, Australia, the return of five US bases to the Philippines since 2019 after complete evacuation in 1991. “Aggressiveness” from Beijing, no doubt. For no reason?

[16] Quoted in D. Lague, B Kang Lim, Reuters, 23 April 2019, [“How China is replacing America as Asia's military titan”](#).

[17] 24 November 2021, p. 3 [“Overview of ASEAN-China relations”](#).

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[18] Dino Patti Djalal (Indonesia), *East Asia Forum*, 28 October 2021 [“Asian responses to Aukus security dynamic”](#).

[19] China is Africa's leading trading partner, ahead of the United States since 2009, without forgetting the \$100 million granted in 2015 to the African Union for "peace initiatives", the massive presence in Djibouti and the rapprochement with the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. We will learn much by reading the note from the Congressional Research Service, 4 September 2019 [" China's engagement in Djibouti"](#).

[20] Seven other Pacific States participate: Vanuatu, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Niue, Cook Island and New Zealand.

[21] On this subject and for a very remarkable presentation of the BRI, cf. Loh Peiyong , *The Kontinentalist* , 11 November 2018, [“Understanding the Belt Road”](#); see also Pranay Varada, *Harvard International Review*, 6 December 2021 [“Micronesia , the next US-China battleground”](#).

[22] Quoted in D. Lague, B Kang Lim (cf. note 16)