

Blogpost

Playing the Trump Card

As Britain departs the European Union and adopts a more global direction in foreign relations, it will no doubt face an increased draw on her security resources to areas beyond Europe. This is especially true of the Asia Pacific region, where freed from the shackles of the customs union and single market, Britain will seek to make a new trading relationship not only with traditionally close countries such as Australia, but others in the region. Indeed, the British ambassador to Washington has already said that:

As we bring our two new aircraft carriers on-stream in 2020, and as we renew and update our defence forces, they will be seen in the Pacific. And we absolutely share the objective of this US administration, and the next one, to protect freedom of navigation and to keep sea routes and air routes open.

Which was reinforced by the Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson in July 2017, whilst visiting Australia who said:

One of the first things we will do with the two new colossal aircraft carriers that we have just built is send them on a freedom of navigation operation to this area [the South China Sea], to vindicate our belief in the rules-based international system and in the freedom of navigation through those waterways which are absolutely vital for world trade.

This was reinforced by his Australian counterpart Julie Bishop:

We spoke about the challenges including in the South China Sea and we had a long discussion about the Pacific and the opportunities for deeper British engagement in our part of the world.

With a finite amount of resources available for military deployments there will be increasing demand in non-European theaters. At the same time, the current US administration has presented at the very least a lukewarm approach to the NATO alliance. Despite President Trump's recommitment to Article 5 in a press conference with the Romanian President in June, the President's conference with NATO allies the previous month has left many leaders nervous about the United States commitment to the defense of Europe, particularly those states previously occupied by the Soviet Union. The lessons of the recent events in the Ukraine have been that non-NATO members in Russia's sphere of influence may face military incursion. It is

also clear that the European powers alone do not have the wherewithal to deter incursions without a sound backing from the United States and they would be in an even weaker position should they lose the backing of the United Kingdom, the alliance's largest military spender other than the United States. According to NATO's own assessment in 2016 the United Kingdom outspent Europe's largest defense spender, France (who's own commitment to NATO has always been less than whole hearted) by approximately the total spending of Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, and Luxembourg. This also does not account for the economy of scale presented by larger military nations or any qualitative advantages British experience brings to defense operations. Nor the effects of the UK nuclear weapons as part of NATO's defense posture.

Although Prime Minister May committed the United Kingdom to the support of NATO in her January 2017 press conference with President Trump, it will become increasingly difficult to justify spending commitments to the defense of Europe, if the Article 50 negotiations are seen as punitive or on terms that are detrimental to the British economy. Given the United Kingdom is committed to spending two percent of GDP on defence, it is also clear if there is any sharp decline in GDP then the total spending in real terms will be reduced. If as we have discussed above there is an increased draw on British resources to a more global context then it is also logical Britain will favor deploying those assets in areas where it is seeking new markets. It is also evident that the European Union will not be easily able to replicate NATO's ability to deter Russia, with little public appetite for increased defense spending of even the modest amount proposed by President Trump. It is incumbent on both sides of the negotiating table in the Article 50 talks to take onboard the negative security effects a reduced British presence in Europe would mean for future European and European Union security, and for the United Kingdom to make its long-term security commitments to European defence dependent on a beneficial trading relationship with the European Union.

