

# “Global Britain” and its Correlation with United Kingdom’s Intervention in South China Sea

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**Abstract.** South China Sea is often called as conflict prone area, where the conflict between international parties doesn’t come to end yet. The escalation of the conflict is also invited the intervention of countries outside Southeast Asia and East Asia such as United Kingdom, United States of America, and France. This paper is going to examine the reason behind the deployment of HMS Queen Elizabeth ship policy in 2021 to the South China Sea by United Kingdom. Using the frameworks of idea in foreign policy and Goldstein and Keohane’s type of idea, the author found the idea of Global Britain serves as a foreign policy guide (road map), and the shared beliefs that have been agreed upon it are what prompted United Kingdom to send its largest ship to the South China Sea. From the author’s analysis, there are two things from the idea of Global Britain, wanted to be shown by the UK through the intervention of HMS Queen Elizabeth: a strong-independent UK and Britain as a 'hero' of global trade.

**Keywords:** United Kingdom, HMS Queen Elizabeth, South China Sea, ideas, Global Britain

## 1 Introduction

The South China Sea (SCS) continues to be a conflict-prone area after China unilaterally claimed nearly 90% of the territorial waters [1]. China's historical claim or the so-called '9-Dash Line' which first appeared in the 1947 Kuomintang era, was opposed by most countries because it was being made unilaterally by China without going through the agreement of international law of the sea convention (UNCLOS 1982), full of ambiguity, and no clear legal basis. China's unilateral claim often overlaps with the maritime zone of several countries around the South China Sea, such as Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam. The SCS area is also a strategic and important commercial-economic area in the Indo-Pacific which increasingly makes the SCS full of conflicts escalation.

The escalation of the conflict that has not ended is also invited the intervention of countries outside Southeast Asia and South Asia such as UK, United States of America, and France. 2018, the first opposition of UK againsts China control was by sending the warship HMS Albion near

the Paracel Islands chain. 2019, UK conducted joint military exercises with the US Navy using the HMS Argyll frigate. 2020, UK was reported to deploy the aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth, the largest and most powerful ship of the British Navy, to the area in 2021 and has been approved by military officials [1]. HMS Queen Elizabeth as a British aircraft carrier has a number of interesting facts such as: first, HMS Queen Elizabeth is referred as a supercarrier [2] and is part of the UK Carrier Strike Group (UKCSG-a group of ships carrying British Navy war equipment) which is described by British Royal Navy as "the leader of the largest and most powerful maritime force in Europe for almost 20 years". Second, it was described by Queen Elizabeth II as "the embodiment of Britain's best technology and innovation" [3]. Third, the ship is capable of carrying up to 65,000 tons at a speed of 25 knots, or the equivalent of 72 airplanes and 24 anti-lightning jets (op.cit). Fourth, HMS Queen Elizabeth was only completed in 2017 and will conduct its maiden operation in 2021 in the Pacific-LCS. Given that the operating costs of the monstrous ship are certainly not cheap, what does the UK want to show by sending it to the South China Sea?

Although the shipping of the HMS Queen Elizabeth was not the first British intervention in the South China Sea, according to the authors, this phenomenon is still interesting to be examined because there is a strong symbolism in the deployment of the ship. Therefore, this paper has the main problem formula: "Why did Britain carry out a policy of sending its largest and strongest ship to the SCS region?" And to answer this question, this paper uses the concept of ideas in foreign policy, with the main argument that British policy is driven by the idea of "Global Britain".

## **2 Theoretical framework**

### **2.1 Concept of idea in foreign policy**

The concept of ideas was born to explain changes in international relations which are increasingly difficult to explain by using traditional perspectives such as realism and liberalism. One of them is Alexander Wendt who says that first, the structure of how people gather or associate is actually determined more by shared ideas than material forces. Second, the identities and interests of the actors are shaped by these shared ideas, not something that is given. The idea itself is seen as "an idea held by the individual, is to explain the political end result which is especially related to foreign policy" [4]. Meanwhile, Bamber [5] reveals that an idea is a set of ideas or a form of shared practice – which means it is non-material or idealistic – and has the ability to build meaning in the idea itself. National interest will change-built socially because it is influenced by ideas or ideas. Likewise, international relations are built through the process of social interaction [6]. Temperley also mentions that ideas are able to influence foreign policy or international relations phenomena because first, they empower actors through ideas, and second, ideas form identities that determine individual and state interests. So it can be concluded that all international elements such as relations between countries, institutions, norms, policies, identities and interests of actors are not something that is stagnant or fixed but something that is dynamic and will continue to change [7].

So that it can be concluded, the idea or idea acts as an independent variable and a country's foreign policy as the dependent variable [8]. Furthermore, Goldstein and Keohane [4] systematically explain how ideas can play an important role and influence policy, especially

foreign policy. First, Goldstein and Keohane divide 3 types of ideas: world views, principled beliefs, and causal beliefs. First, World views is defined as how the world is seen. The ideas are deeply embedded through culture or tradition and influence most human actions. This idea is also related to the paradigm or human view of who he is, identity, emotion, and deep loyalty. Examples of this type of idea are such as religion and ideology. Second, principled belief is a normative view of what is right and wrong and what is fair and unfair. This idea is often divided into 2 side : those who support and those who reject, thus often creating conflict; revolution; or even bloodshed. An example of this idea is the perspective that support the existing of LGBTQ (LGBTQ is the embodiment of human rights) and against it in Indonesia (LGBTQ is an immoral act). Third, casual belief is the result of elite consensus about a cause-and-effect relationship that is manifested in the form of guidelines. This idea emphasizes cooperation, togetherness, and shared belief to achieve certain goals. Examples of this idea are the SDGs program and the Kyoto Protocol.

Furthermore, Goldstein and Keohane divide 3 ways how ideas can influence foreign policy: road map, equilibrium, and institutions. First, a road map in the form of guidelines or instructions for actors to realize ideas in their policies. This path plays a role so that actors can achieve the desired goals, build the right strategy, and minimize risk. Second, equilibrium is a path that unites differences in interests that can arise when cooperating. This pathway emphasizes collective action and shared values/norms, which are often realized through alliances or the international community. Third, institutions, namely by integrating ideas into institutions or regimes which are often in the form of legal products such as international conventions and the Constitution.

### **3 Discussion**

#### **3.1 Idea of Global Britain-The Future is outside Europe Union**

Global Britain is an idea used by the United Kingdom government as a embodiment of its post-Brexit policy. Global Britain was first mentioned by former British Prime Minister, Theresa May, in her first Brexit speech in 2017:

“I want us to be a truly Global Britain – the best friend and neighbor to our European partners, but a country that reaches beyond the borders of Europe too. A country that goes out into the world to build relationships with old friends and new allies alike.” [9]

This idea was also frequently mentioned by Borish Johnson in his speeches after the Brexit policy was implemented:

“And after three years of unfounded self-doubt, it is time to change the record. To recover our natural and historic role as an enterprising, outward-looking and truly global Britain, generous in temper and engaged with the world.”-Borish Johnson's first speech as Prime Minister [10].

This idea shows the UK's ambition to be more outward looking beyond the European region, heading to the global arena after leaving the Europe Union. The only goal is : an increasingly globalized England. This idea is viewed through Goldstein and Keohane's framework, Global Britain is a type of causal belief idea because it is the idea of the consensus of the elites (Theresa May continued by Borish Johnson) which is manifested in the form of guidelines regarding

cause and effect causality (because Brexit has occurred, then the UK must make a new and more dominant policy to maintain its existence) and influence British foreign policy through the roadmap. Global Britain has not been in the form of a common forum or integrated into a particular institution or regime, this idea is still a guide / guide to achieve the goals of a globalized UK, develop the right strategy to achieve it, and minimize risks. In the idea of Global Britain there are shared beliefs that influence UK intervention in the South China Sea: strong, independent, and heroes of free trade.

### **3.2 Global Britain: The strong and independent UK**

PM Boris Johnson's speech on November 19, 2020 clearly implied that The UK would like to reaffirm its important role and influence in the global sphere:

"Next year, HMS Queen Elizabeth will lead a British and allied task group on our most ambitious deployment for two decades, encompassing the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean and East Asia.... Reviving our armed forces is one pillar of the Government's ambition to safeguard Britain's interests and values by strengthening our global influence....the defense of the realm is above party politics. The deployment would be a strong signal that Britain is stepping up its presence."

Johnson described HMS Queen Elizabeth as the most expensive ship ever to be UK's ambitious mission for 2 decades. And more, Johnson explained that in order to make Global Britain come into real, the government will improve defense and security budget of £16.5 billion, with total investment 190 billion poundsterling for the next 4 years to make England a country with the highest defense and security budget in Europe and second in NATO after America [11]. The goal is to restore Britain's position as a country with the leading naval power in Europe and protect British interests. Even Johnson calls 'territorial defense above politics' where the UK's priority is related to global security. According to the "Power" framework by Joseph Nye [12], military power included to the hard power that influences the preferences of other countries according to our goals through the forces of the material. Hard power tends to be threatening and coercive, which meaning UK wants to 'force' China to stop its unilateral claim by the real strength of British materials: fierce, strong, outstanding, and great. At least HMS Queen Elizabeth sends a message to China and the world not to continue to violate international order and belittling UK. It can be concluded that UK wants to emphasize strong existence (globally) by taking down HMS Queen Elizabeth in dealing with international conflicts.

Second, UK wants to show its independent existence. Even though there are criticism that Britain actions are still in America's shadow especially regarding Huawei 5G ban in UK [13], [14], UK's PM explained that the delivery of HMS Queen Elizabeth as part of a 'tradition' to go back to the UK who once had helped NATO and kept the peace during the War Cold. Which shows that Johnson and the elites want to restore glory as in the past, not merely following the direction of America and the European Union.

UK is UK, which has its own values and traditions regarding global peace-security defense which makes it different from America and the European Union. May and Johnson too often use vocabulary in their speech indicating EU and UK are 2 separate subjects: "after we leave", "UK global existence" "exceeds Europe", "Britain's new role", "Great Britain ambition", "Misfit", "EU restrictions", and so on. Previously, September 2020 Britain-German-French first sent a note together to the United Nations to reject China's claim in the South China Sea, based

on the Court's decision Maritime Arbitration in 2016. This British independence signals UK is ready to cooperate with other countries on international issues, pro-actively emphasizes multilateralism and harmony without boundaries.

### **3.3 Global Britain: UK as the 'hero' of free trade**

One of the UK's main interests in the South China Sea is related to international economy and trade, where May and Johnson very often raise issues of global economy and trade as the main framework for the idea of Global Britain :

“It's why that plan sets out how we will use this moment of change to build a stronger economy and a fairer society by embracing genuine economic and social reform..... And those ends are clear: I want to remove as many barriers to trade as possible. And I want Britain to be free to establish our own tariff schedules at the World Trade Organization, meaning we can reach new trade agreements not just with the EU but with old friends and new allies from outside Europe too.” –Theresa May's speech, January 17, 2017

Even in the speech dated January 17, more than 35 'trade' words were mentioned by May. This is supported by Johnson who said that UK must become a “global free trade superman” and “free trade is God's Diplomacy, the only way to bring people together peacefully” (Johnson's speech 3 February 2020).

The SCS region as a strategic, vital and dense maritime trade route reaches a total of \$3 trillion every year so the conduciveness and security of the SCS region is something that is very important, especially for the UK. By the APReuters team [15], the Hong-Kong security issue also provides a deep understanding that China's aggressiveness does not tend to decrease, so it is feared that its aggressiveness will increase in the SCS region. It can be concluded that China's aggressiveness which continues to harm and hinder the interests of the UK's global economy has given rise to intervention in the South China Sea. Furthermore, British diplomats stated that the intervention of HMS Queen Elizabeth was to uphold freedom of navigation, in order to ensure the openness of sea and air routes, which means that it can be linked to the UK's commitment to global trade without barriers.

## **4 Conclusion**

British intervention that occurred in 2021 by sending the HMS Queen Elizabeth to the South China Sea is influenced by the idea of Global Britain which was first mentioned by Theresa May in 2017, then continued by the Boris Johnson regime since 2019. The idea of Global Britain serves as a foreign policy guide England (road map), and the shared beliefs that have been agreed upon in it are what prompted Britain to send its largest ship to the South China Sea. From the author's analysis, it was found the 2 things from the idea of Global Britain, wanted to be shown by the UK through the intervention of HMS Queen Elizabeth: a strong-independent UK and Britain as a 'hero' of global trade. First, UK affirms its strong presence and influence in the global sphere with the real Britain material power, HMS Queen Elizabeth and it is threatening to China. Furthermore, the delivery of HMS Queen Elizabeth shows an independent UK (different and not limited by the EU) so that the UK is more prepared to become a partner of international countries. In terms of global trade value, the UK's intervention in the South China

Sea demonstrates its commitment to borderless trade – by pursuing freedom of navigation through HMS Queen Elizabeth.

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