

Your guide to a disrupted world

Save 33%

Opinion **Geopolitics**

The west looks like a political risk to Asian allies

Economic and political turmoil at home is undercutting our Indo-Pacific ambitions

BEN BLAND



Boris Johnson celebrates Chinese new year in Downing Street. A hard Brexit has hampered Britain's closer collaboration with its European partners in the Indo-Pacific © Ben Stansall/AFP/Getty Images

Ben Bland 8 HOURS AGO

The writer is the Director of the Asia-Pacific Programme at Chatham House and a former FT correspondent in Hong Kong, Jakarta and Hanoi

“Political risk” has traditionally been the lens through which western governments and businesses analyse the outside world. This framing has spawned a lucrative global industry of its own, one that can obscure as much as it clarifies.

Since returning to a UK in political disarray two months ago, following 14 years in Asia, I’ve been struck by the fact that many [Asian governments](#) and companies are now looking back at us through this same lens. In conversations with senior Asian officials, they keep raising one overarching concern: can we count on the UK, Europe and the US to stay engaged when they are facing so many problems at home?

From the turmoil of Boris Johnson’s government to fears of a return of Trumpism, from the continued strength of the far right in France to simmering tensions within the EU, politics in the west looks both unstable and unpredictable.

In Tokyo, Seoul, Jakarta and New Delhi, many hope that the US, UK and EU will boost their diplomatic, economic and security engagement in the region, to give them more options and help to counter an ever more powerful and assertive Beijing.

But the rising [political risks](#) across the western world undercut our governments’

grand strategic plans to play a bigger role in the Indo-Pacific and pursue broad-spectrum competition with China. Many of our Asian friends doubt our commitment, our willingness to deploy limited resources and our staying power, in stark contrast to the enduring presence of China to their north.

It's not only about how long Johnson or Joe Biden stay in office. It's about how much they truly prioritise Asia and how much of their precious political and financial capital they are willing to spend on the region when they face intense cost of living pressures at home, strained government budgets and a war in Europe.

Much of the long-term work of building diplomatic and military relationships ought to fall on the professionals in the civil service and the military. Yet their ability to play this sustainable, non-partisan role is curtailed by political pressures and the broader financial squeeze.

Take Biden's Build Back Better World plan, which was launched last year to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative. It has fared little better than its stalled domestic namesake, the Build Back Better Bill. US officials working on the Indo-Pacific have criticised the administration's failure to marshal a better economic offering for the region.

The UK's Indo-Pacific tilt, which was announced last year as part of the Integrated Review of foreign and security policy, has also been hampered by political realities. The renewed focus on the world's most dynamic region sounds good on paper. But, even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office was struggling to organise itself following the politically motivated absorption of the Department for International Development in 2020. The war in Ukraine has further pulled resources and attention away.

Britain should be collaborating more closely with its European partners in the Indo-Pacific, particularly France and Germany. However, the Johnson government's hard line on post-Brexit negotiations makes this incredibly difficult in practice. While western officials and analysts often shake their heads in dismay at the inability of Japan and South Korea to overcome their historical differences, diplomats in Seoul and Tokyo look upon the fractious Franco-British relationship with much the same consternation.

With our politics likely to remain in flux, and our Asian partners wary of our ability to deliver, we need to look more critically at our capabilities and core interests. Where can the US, UK and EU allies have the most impact with the fewest resources? Where

can we co-operate effectively with each other despite our differences?

We also need to think more carefully about our comparative advantages in competing with China, rather than obsessing over every single thing that Beijing does. We should play to our various strengths in finance, education, the media and soft power, rather than try to imitate China's efforts at infrastructure-building efforts.

Democracy will always generate some degree of domestic turbulence. But the extent of our current social, political and economic turmoil is hurting our credibility in Asia, and our ability to fulfil our strategic objectives in the region.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2022. All rights reserved.
