

The empire has no clothes? The UK, the Indo-Pacific ‘tilt’, and bargaining towards a Southeast Asian role

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical analysis of the UK’s stated goals for the Indo-Pacific ‘tilt’ (Integrated Review 2021, Integrated Review Refresh 2023), its activities so far, and the expectations of regional states in Southeast Asia. It draws upon role theory to argue that while there are growing connections between the UK’s role conception and Southeast Asia’s role expectations in relation to the Indo-Pacific emerging, there remain significant disjunctions. We argue that post-Brexit, the UK conceives itself as a vanguard of the open international order which has created distinct security and policy prescriptions (which we label role claims). We argue these role claims do not always align with the expectations Southeast Asian nations have for the UK, creating obstacles for role legitimation and resulting in bargaining concerning the UK’s ultimate role. This paper argues that these disparities have to some degree been recognised by the UK, who have rolled back some claims to be a leader in security, economy, and values in Southeast Asia. However, the UK still needs to adapt to the region’s preferred role for Britain of cooperative partner and capacity builder. Through this we provide an original contribution to theoretical discussions concerning how the concept of roles is understood within international relations through a focus on the expectations of regional states as an essential dynamic in the negotiation of roles.¹

Keywords

Maritime Security, Indo-Pacific Tilt, Role Conflict, Global Britain, Southeast Asia

Introduction

In March 2021 the UK government published its Integrated Review of foreign and security policy (hereafter ‘IR 2021’), with the intention of setting out the UK’s global role for the next decade. A prominent aspect of the IR 2021 was the intention to deepen security, economic and diplomatic engagement in the Indo-Pacific – dubbed the Indo-Pacific tilt.² This marked the UK’s commitment to the geostrategic vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific which has been adopted by Japan, Australia, the United States, and the European Union in recent years, seeking to redefine the Asia-Pacific in a way that de-centres China and, at least in the official discourse, to embed the values of open commerce, democracy and human rights. The updated IR 2023 retains the centrality of Indo-Pacific concerns,³

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² HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age, the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (London, Cabinet Office, 2021).

³ IR 2023 marks the tilt as “achieved”, with a target of making “this increased engagement stronger and enduring, and a permanent pillar of the UK’s international policy”. We continue to refer to the tilt throughout as

unsurprisingly given ongoing debates about China’s designation as either “systemic competitor” or “threat”.⁴ There are significant changes, however. The normative focus on human rights is muted, the primacy of the Euro-Atlantic following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is emphasised through discussions of linkages between the Euro-Pacific, and the UK’s leadership role in the Indo-Pacific has become de-centred in favour of partnerships and realignment to listening to regional needs.⁵

Since the announcement of the Indo-Pacific tilt, policy debate within the UK has focused on how to translate the stated intentions into policy implementation. The debate has been framed by the overarching conception of global politics underlying IR 2021 and broadly accepted by the epistemic community of politicians, government officials and thinktankers in London – that the world is split between an open, liberal order and a closed, authoritarian one, with competition between these orders and their principal powers taking place across the spheres of security, economics, technology, diplomacy, and values. While softened in the IR 2023, the UK’s claimed role in the Indo-Pacific is consistent with its global role as a leader in promoting the open order and countering the influence of authoritarian powers – particularly China. Implementation of the tilt therefore has a strong security dimension including deploying the Strike Carrier Group and a permanent, if small, naval presence, establishing AUKUS, new defence agreements with Japan, and even bases.⁶ The economic dimension has involved signing mostly continuity free trade agreements with states in the region and applying to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Diplomatically, the UK appointed an ambassador to ASEAN in 2019 and subsequently achieved ASEAN dialogue partner status in 2021. In August 2022 the relationship was institutionalised through the signing of the plan of action for the ASEAN-UK dialogue partnership. The UK has also revived the UK-Thailand and UK-Vietnam strategic dialogues, established a strategic dialogue with Malaysia, signed a partnership roadmap with Indonesia and a partnership agreement with Singapore.

Despite these diplomatic advances in Southeast Asia, the region remains relatively peripheral in UK policy debates on the tilt and tends to be treated as a theatre for competition between China and the “free world” rather than explored as a complex and diverse region that both presents its own opportunities for the UK and has its own needs and priorities. We argue that this led to significant initial divergences between the UK’s conception of its role within Southeast Asia as part of the tilt, and the expectations of stakeholders within Southeast Asia. We draw on role theory to analyse the UK’s role conceptualisation process, focusing on the epistemic community behind the formulation of IR 2021, 2023 and the Indo-Pacific tilt. We then discuss the expectations of Southeast Asian stakeholders drawing on data from preliminary interviews as well as commentaries published in the region. These expectations matter. For the UK to perform a constructive role in Southeast Asia – one that not only reflects its own ambitions but contributes to supporting regional order – its conceptualisation and enactment of that role need to have legitimacy with these regional stakeholders. Put simply, “Britain’s foreign policy [...] will not be defined merely by what role Britain wants to play, but equally by what role other states let Britain play”.⁷ Recognising this, we argue that a role bargaining process has begun as exemplified in the changes present in IR 2023, but that this has not yet been sufficiently realised to align the UK’s role conception with Southeast Asian expectations. This will involve

a shorthand for this ongoing target. HM Government, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023* (London, HM Stationery Office, 2023)

⁴ Foreign Affairs Committee, *Refreshing our approach? Updating the Integrated Review* (London, House of Commons, 2022)

⁵ HM Government, *Integrated Review, 2023*

⁶ The language of bases is seen in domestic debates, while the discussion happening regionally concerns ‘access’ for future maritime deployments.

⁷ Kai Oppermann, Ryan Beasley, and Juliet Kaarbo ‘British foreign policy after Brexit: losing Europe and finding a role’, *International Relations* 34:2 (2019), p. 134.

continuing to learn from engagement with the region and seeking ways to better link the epistemic community based in London with those based in Southeast Asia. This is especially important if the UK is to develop a relationship with ASEAN that is both distinct from the relationship it enjoyed as a member of the EU and sufficient enough to become a preferred partner.

To explain the process of potential innovation and its ongoing limitations, we use the theoretical framework of role theory, focusing on role conceptions, claims, and conflicts. We argue current literature focuses most strongly on role conception, and less so on the expectation of regional partners and the negotiation this both necessitates and entails, despite recognition of the importance of this in the literature. Much of the exploration of role conflict in the UK process has focused primarily on either the UK's material capacities or domestic conflicts between different role conceptions, with only the expectations of non-Southeast Asian powers considered.⁸

Through analysing IR 2021 and 2023 and their implementation using the above framework, we make two primary contributions. First, we focus on the most global policy articulated so far – that of the Indo-Pacific tilt.⁹ We analyse the extent to which the UK can make role claims and the implications for the tilt's implementation, but also the implications for its overarching role conception of being a global power. Second, we demonstrate that the expectations of regional states are an essential-yet-underrepresented dynamic in the negotiation over the UK's role in the Indo-Pacific. The outcome of role conflicts between the UK and regional powers could ultimately provide barriers to the tilt's implementation, but there are also areas of convergence which offer promising opportunities and policy innovation in the UK. Specifically, we identify that the roles of cooperative partner and capacity-builder as offering further potential for convergence rather than any UK claims to leadership in the region.

Theoretical framework

We briefly outline in this section a role negotiation framework which draws from role theory. Beyond role conception, key role theory concepts relevant for our analysis are: role expectations; role contestation; and role conflict.¹⁰

National role conception refers to a state's own understanding of their role(s) in international society. Role expectations refer to what behaviour others regard as appropriate for that state within international society.¹¹ The interactive process between these can lead to both contestation and conflict. Role contestation refers to contests over how a role is conceptualised and/or enacted, with these taking the form of domestic contests (between different social groups influencing foreign policy within a state) or international contests (between states and/or other actors on the international stage).¹² Role conflict can refer to situations where there is conflict between different role conceptions within a state, and either its own material capabilities (meaning it is unable to mobilise resources to perform that role), or key others' role expectations.¹³

⁸ See for example, John Bradford 'US Perspectives and Expectations Regarding The UK's Tilt to The Indo-Pacific', *RUSI Journal*, 167:6/7 (2023) pp. 24-32

⁹ *Ibid.*; Jamie Gaskarth 'Strategy, Tactics and Tilts: A Networked Approach to UK influence in the Indo-Pacific', *RUSI Journal*, 167:6/7 (2023) pp. 12-23; Laura Southgate 'UK-ASEAN Relations and the Balance of Power in Southeast Asia', *RUSI Journal*, 167:6/7 (2023) pp. 64-71

¹⁰ See Marijke Breuning, 'Role Theory in Politics and International Relations', in Alex Mintz, and Lesley Terris (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Behavioral Political Science* (online edn, Oxford Academic, 10 July 2018).

¹¹ Andrew Glencross and David McCourt, 'Living Up to a New Role in the World: The Challenges of "Global Britain"' *Orbis*, 62(4), (2018) pp. 582-597; 2018; Oppermann et al., *British foreign policy*, 2019

¹² Cristian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo, (eds) *Domestic Role Contestation, Foreign Policy, and International Relations*. (New York and London, Routledge, 2016)

¹³ Oppermann et al., *British foreign policy*, 2019

Linking these concepts together requires a framework which captures a process of role negotiation. Figure 1 below provides a simplified framework. It shows how a state not only conceptualises a role but also makes a claim to perform that role, with the substance of the claim determined by whether it is purely discursive – a claim made in a speech for example – or whether the state commits significant resources behind actively enacting the role. Whether that role then becomes legitimised, however, depends on the response of the key constituencies or stakeholders towards whom the claim is made, often referred to as alter-casting.¹⁴ They may legitimate the claim or contest and even actively resist the claim. If there is significant role contestation, then this will lead to a role conflict, which itself may lead to change in foreign policy if a state becomes socialised into a distinct role.¹⁵

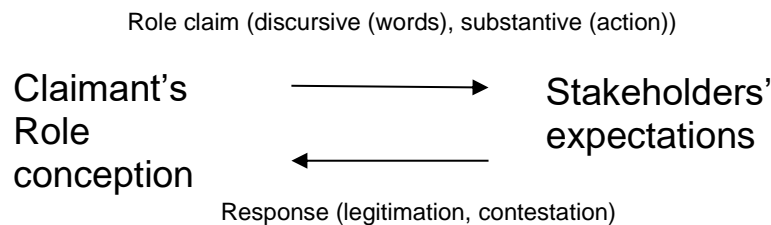


Figure 1 - Simplified framework of role negotiation¹⁶

This paper therefore seeks to determine the nature of the UK’s role conception and claim in Southeast Asia as part of its Indo-Pacific tilt, the responses of regional constituencies – whether legitimisation or contestation – and whether there is a conflict between the role the UK claims to perform and what the regional constituencies understand as the UK’s appropriate role.¹⁷

Britain’s role in Southeast Asia pre-Brexit

Prior to Brexit, Britain appeared to be lacking ‘imaginative range’ concerning its foreign policy, with a dependence on the two pillars of the EU and its transatlantic relationship with the US to play a global role.¹⁸ Jamie Gaskarth and Nicola Langdon argue that before Brexit, the UK was in danger of strategic drift, while David McCourt refers to it as playing the role of a residual great power.¹⁹

This could be seen in Southeast Asia, which became the centre of attention in the 1960s for those debating what Britain’s role in the world should be. While the motivations for withdrawal are debated,²⁰ ultimately there was a retreat of UK’s permanent military forces East of Suez by 1971 – with

¹⁴ David McCourt, *Britain and World Power since 1945: Constructing a Nation's Role in International Politics* (Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2014)

¹⁵ Jamie Gaskarth, ‘Strategizing Britain's role in the world’, *International Affairs* 90:3, (2014); Oppermann et al., *British foreign policy*, 2019

¹⁶ Based on Robert Yates (2019). *Understanding ASEAN's Role in Asia-Pacific Order* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

¹⁷ The current focus has been on the UK’s material capacities or on domestic conflicts between different role conceptions, see for example Oppermann et al., *British foreign policy*, 2019

¹⁸ Jamie Gaskarth and Nicola Langdon, ‘The dilemma of Brexit: hard choices in the narrow context of British foreign policy traditions’, *British Politics* 16(2), (2021) p. 170, 177

¹⁹ Gaskarth, *Strategizing*, 2014; McCourt, *Britain*, 2014

²⁰ David McCourt, ‘What was Britain's “East of Suez Role”? Reassessing the Withdrawal, 1964–1968’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 20(3) (2019) pp. 453-472; Saki Dockrill, ‘*Britain's Retreat from East of Suez: The Choice between Europe and the World* (London, Palgrave, 2002); Matthew James, ‘A Decision Delayed: Britain's Withdrawal from South East Asia Reconsidered, 1961-68’, *The English Historical Review* 117:472 (2002) pp. 569-595; Phuong L. Pham *Ending 'East of Suez': The British Decision to Withdraw from Malaysia and Singapore 1964-1968* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010); Sue Thompson, *British Military Withdrawal and the Rise of Regional Cooperation in South-East Asia, 1964-73* (London, Palgrave, 2014);

only residual and separately conceived links in Hong Kong and Brunei, as well as the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). The UK realigned its focus to the European Economic Community (EEC) to improve its economic standing, in what Michael Dockrill represents as an outcome of the decision to choose the world or Europe,²¹ with transatlanticism an additional pillar of UK policy.²² While David McCourt argues that any East-of-Suez role itself was a rhetorical construction, he concludes that the evaluation itself “led to a weakening of East of Suez as a specific role conception”.²³

Once the UK joined the EEC, later the EU, a more collective foreign policy focused on broadening economic contact, and then the EU faced its own strategic drift as EU members focused on constructing the single market.²⁴ Anthony Forster argues for example that “the EU’s 1994 New Asia Strategy overlooked ASEAN”.²⁵ At the same time, while the EU’s gradually increasing links were perceived as supplementing the UK’s bilateral ties, these remained limited as the UK focused on the transatlantic relationship through NATO and US-led interventions in the Middle East.^{26,27} As Laura Southgate demonstrates, it was only in the 2010s that Southeast Asia began registering at all, though such moves remained limited to accession to ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC).²⁸

Towards Global Britain

The idea that the UK has a re-invigorated role to play on the international stage is most commonly attributed to the disruption that Brexit caused to Britain’s identity and foreign policy thinking. Jamie Gaskarth and Nicola Langdon, for example, argue that the development of “Global Britain” as an identity was an immediate response to the UK’s role in a post-Brexit era,²⁹ with Andrew Glencross and David McCourt attributing reflection to “status anxiety”.³⁰

Indeed, this re-invigorated role conception can be seen clearly in Britain’s new strategic narrative set out in the IR 2021. Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle identify three forms of strategic narratives: 1) narratives about the international system and international order; 2) narratives seeking to influence policies; 3) and narratives about an actor’s identity and role.³¹ The IR contains all three forms under what we could term the Global Britain strategic narrative. Table 1 below summarises the Global Britain strategic narrative drawn from the IR 2021, including a comparison with IR 2023 which will be discussed later in the paper.

	IR 2021	IR 2023
	Four trends:	- Reaffirms the four trends

William James (2021) ‘Global Britain’s strategic problem East of Suez’, *European Journal of International Security* 6:2, (2021); John Subritzky ‘Britain, Konfrontasi, and the end of empire in Southeast Asia, 1961–65’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 28:3, (2000), pp. 209-227

²¹ Dockrill, *Britain’s retreat*, 2002

²² Pham, *Ending*, 2010

²³ McCourt, *What was Britain’s*, 2019, p. 460

²⁴ Anthony Forster, *The European Union in South-East Asia: Continuity and Change in Turbulent Times*, *International Affairs* 75: 4), (1999), pp. 743-758

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 752

²⁶ Mark Garnett, Simon Mabon, and Robert Smith, *British foreign policy since 1945* (Oxon, Routledge, 2018)

²⁷ See, for example, Matt Beech, ‘British Conservatism and Foreign Policy: Traditions and Ideas Shaping Cameron’s Global View’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 13(3), (2011), pp. 348-363

²⁸ Southgate, *UK-ASEAN*, 2023

²⁹ Gaskarth & Langdon, *The Dilemma*, 2021

³⁰ Glencross & McCourt, *Living Up*, 2018

³¹ Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2013).

<p>International system and international order</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts leading to multipolar world order with more instability, reduced opportunities for cooperation between competitor states, and challenges to democratic governance - Systemic competition between open, democratic societies and authoritarian states across multiple spheres: military, economic, cyber-space, space - Rapid technological change and science and technology as the basis for power in the competitive age - Transnational challenges: climate change, biodiversity loss, global health, migratory flows, terrorism, serious and organised crime 	<p>outlined in IR 2021 but states that the pace of these trends has accelerated</p>
<p>Policies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shape the open international order of the future - Promote human rights, transparency, good governance and open markets - Shape an open and resilient global economy which is digital and sustainable - Shape new norms and rules to govern the frontiers of the international order in cyber-space and space - Strengthen security and defence at home and overseas - Build resilience at home and overseas 	<p>Shape the international environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shape an open and stable international order of well-managed cooperation and competition between sovereign states on the basis of reciprocity, norms of responsible behaviour and respect for the fundamental principles of the UN Charter and international law - Geographic priorities in Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific - Thematic priorities: climate change, environment damage and biodiversity loss; shape the emerging digital and technology order; shape norms and rules of behaviour in cyber space; balance and shape in the maritime domain <p>Deter, defend and compete across all domains</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Integrated approach to deterrence and defence

		<p>(nuclear deterrent; conventional, cyber and space forces; burden sharing with allies and partners)</p> <p>Address vulnerabilities through resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Priority areas: energy security; climate change and environmental damage; health resilience; economic security; democratic and wider societal resilience; education sector; protective security; cyber security and resilience; UK border) <p>Generate strategic advantage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Science and technology - Economic strength - Updating statecraft for systemic competition (Renew and re-skill our core diplomatic capability; develop intelligence agencies; establish a new open-source intelligence (OSINT) hub; establish national defence college)
Role conception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leader in science and technology - Responsible, democratic cyberpower - Diplomatic leader in facing global challenges - Force for good in protecting open societies and defending human rights - Soft power superpower 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Globally-engaged power with a uniquely diverse range of national strengths - Protector of global public goods - Responsible and democratic cyber power - Renewed leader in international development - Leader in promoting health resilience - Leading position in NATO

Table 1 - Global Britain strategic narrative and role conceptualisation in IR 2021 and 2023³²

This strategic narrative was also prominent in the UK’s refreshed National Maritime Security Strategy (NMSS), demonstrating how they have become embedded in UK foreign policy discourse.³³ The National Maritime Security Strategy re-emphasises the narrative of “resurgence of state-based threats, intensifying wider state competition and the erosion of the rules-based international order”,

³² HM Government, *Global Britain*, 2021

³³ HM Government, *National Maritime Security Strategy*, (London, Department for Transport, 2022)

where “the future success of Global Britain requires us to work with likeminded nations to champion the values which support our nation and the international order”.

The UK’s strategic narrative and its role conceptualisation have been shaped by politicians and intellectuals on the political right. The leading thinktank providing intellectual input is Policy Exchange. Its Britain in the World Project head John Bew was appointed as the Prime Minister’s Special Advisor on Foreign Policy in 2019 and was the lead author for the IR 2021.³⁴ The Policy Exchange reflection on IR 2021 noted the successful adoption of their vision of a “threats-based competitive strategic approach”. Its emphasis on protecting the liberal order and a shift to the Indo-Pacific through increased security ties with India and Japan won out over the Chatham House vision of a softer more Europe-aligned foreign policy.³⁵ The substantive ideas and policy proposals for the tilt to the Indo-Pacific came from a key Policy Exchange report which had input from conservative-leaning politicians, military figures, diplomats and academics from the UK, Canada, the US, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia.³⁶ The Henry Jackson Society and the Council of Geostrategy, both national security think tanks with a neo-conservative leaning that emphasises active promotion of liberal democracy based on strong military foundations, have also been influential in policy debates.³⁷

Alongside the epistemic community centred around Policy Exchange, the heightened perception of the threat posed by China and the need for the UK to respond more assertively has been shaped in Parliament by the China Research Group. In many ways, this mirrors and draws upon similar developments in the US, where the tougher “strategic competition” frame of China resulted from a “paradigmatic turnover in key individuals’ views of China within the government and the China expert community”.³⁸ The China Research Group (CRG) was spearheaded by Conservative MP Tom Tugendhat who stated that the idea for the CRG came from the Committee’s inquiry into how the UK can respond to autocracies.³⁹ The Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China links parliamentarians across several countries with a stated commitment to develop a coherent approach towards China to feed into member countries’ policies in order to protect the integrity of democratic systems and uphold the rules-based international order. Broader public perceptions of China have worsened alongside this ongoing China debate, especially with increased media coverage of the Covid-19 outbreak in China, the Chinese Communist Party’s crackdown in Hong Kong and human rights abuses in Xinjiang.⁴⁰ This is likely to increase the currency of the UK government’s strategic narrative and global role conception within the UK.

Southeast Asia and the UK’s World View

Southeast Asia and ASEAN are considered in both IR 2021 and IR 2023. In IR 2021, the Indo-Pacific is discussed as the centre of the global geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts and therefore a

³⁴ Gabriel Elefteriu (22 March 2021) The Integrated Review – Policy Exchange’s Reflections <https://policyexchange.org.uk/the-integrated-review-policy-exchanges-reflections/> consulted 14 September 2022.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Policy Exchange (2020). A Very British Tilt: Towards a new UK strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/A-Very-British-Tilt.pdf> consulted 14 September 2022; The Chatham House vision was set out in their 2020 report: Chatham House, *Global Britain, Global Broker* <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/01/global-britain-global-broker> consulted 14 September 2022

³⁷ The Council of Geostrategy website contains details of these events as well as their projects, including the Strong Britain Initiative: <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/>

³⁸ David McCourt, ‘Knowledge Communities in US Foreign Policy Making: The American China Field and the End of Engagement with the PRC’, *Security Studies*, Online First, (2022)

³⁹ Tim Summers, Hiu Man Chan, Peter Gries and Richard Turcsanyi, ‘Worsening British views of China in 2020: evidence from public opinion, parliament, and the media’, *Asia Europe Journal* 20, (2022) pp. 173–194

⁴⁰ Summers et al., *Worsening*, 2022

central theatre for systemic competition with China. The tilt is discussed as important to the UK for ensuring the UK’s economic prosperity and security, and for promoting its values. The stated goal is to be “the European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific – committed for the long term, with closer and deeper partnerships, bilaterally and multilaterally” and the UK’s role is to “lead where we are best placed to do so and [...] partner and support others as necessary to pursue our goals”.⁴¹ The IR 2023 saw a degree of continuity; it stated that the UK “has delivered on the IR2021 ambition for a tilt; the target we now have is to make this increased engagement stronger and enduring, and a permanent pillar of the UK’s international policy”.⁴² Demonstrating how this narrative is embedded in other documentation, within the National Maritime Security Strategy (NMSS) the Indo-Pacific tilt is primarily discussed in the chapter on “Championing our values”, where the UK will “work with allies, partners, and multilateral institutions to maintain a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific”.⁴³ ASEAN is discussed as an existing structure in both IR 2021 and 2023 that the UK will work with, affirming its central role in regional cooperation.

Xinchuchu Gao and Xuechen Chen provide a useful tripartite framework for understanding the UK’s role conceptualisation as it relates to the Indo-Pacific tilt, which can be linked to the Global Britain role identity outlined above as well as the goals set out in the Indo-Pacific framework of the IR 2021 & NMSS, and to a lesser extent IR 2023.⁴⁴ These are: leader in promoting free trade and open economies; security provider; and promoter of liberal norms and values. The tilt framework in IR 2021 identifies nine action areas which relate to the UK’s role conception which are set out below in table 2.

UK role conception	Action areas for the Indo-Pacific tilt	Implementation as part of the Indo-Pacific tilt
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leader in promoting free trade and open economies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bilateral trade agreements and new trade dialogues - Acceding to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership - Strengthening supply chain resilience of critical goods and raw materials - Using ODA more strategically, continuing to support partner countries in the region to combat extreme poverty. - Where countries can finance their development, move gradually from offering grants to providing UK 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with Japan, January 2021 (continuity agreement) - UK-Australia FTA, December 2021 - Continuity FTA with South Korea, 2019 - Continuity FTA with Singapore, 2020 - Continuity FTA with Vietnam, 2020 - UK-New Zealand FTA, 2022 - UK-Singapore Digital Economy Agreement, February 2022 - Negotiations on UK-India FTA started 2022

⁴¹ HM Government, *Global Britain*, 2021

⁴² HM Government, *Integrated Review*, 2023

⁴³ HM Government, *National Maritime*, 2022

⁴⁴ Xinchuchu Gao and Xuechen Chen (2022). “Post-Brexit British Foreign Policy toward Indo-Pacific”.

Presentation at the workshop on UK Indo-Pacific tilt and Southeast Asia: New perspectives and directions, June 2022.

	<p>expertise and returnable capital to address regional challenges in our mutual interest. This will include support for high-quality infrastructure</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - UK moves to second “market access” phase of accession negotiations of CPTPP, February 2022 - British International Investment office to open in Singapore
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Security provider 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthening defence and security cooperation, including in maritime security, building on our overseas military bases and existing contribution in the Indo-Pacific, enhancing our engagement and exercising with our FPDA partners, and increasing our engagement with regional security groupings - Cooperating and building capacity on cyber security 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strike Carrier Group deployment - Continuing deployment of two Offshore Patrol Vessels - Littoral Response Group deployment (scheduled 2023) - Frigate deployment by 2025 - Existing naval support unit in Singapore, and Jungle Warfare School and garrison in Brunei - FPDA Exercise Bersama Gold 2021 and 50th anniversary ceremonies - AUKUS agreement with US and Australia
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Force for good in protecting open societies and defending human rights (priority area in IR 2021 and largely dropped from IR 2023) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Becoming an ASEAN Dialogue Partner to work together on global challenges, support ASEAN’s central role in regional stability and prosperity and enable sustainable development in Southeast Asia. - Tackling climate change, using both adaptation and mitigation activity to support a transition to clean, resilient and sustainable growth in the Indo-Pacific through influence with major and growing emitters and the most vulnerable countries - Promoting open societies and protecting public goods through conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Achieved ASEAN Dialogue Partner status 2021 - Agreed ASEAN-UK Plan of Action August 2022

	<p>prevention, strong rule of law, respect for human rights and media freedoms, girls' education and humanitarian response</p>	
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Table 2 - The UK's role conception for the Indo-Pacific

Before discussing Southeast Asian expectations of the UK's regional role, it is worth considering the substance behind the ambitious claims of Britain's new role in the world.

Britain as a leader promoting free trade and open economies.

Since the Brexit referendum in 2016, successive Conservative governments have been focused on trade agreements – principally negotiating the exit agreement with the European Union, but also continuity agreements with non-EU trade partners, and new free trade agreements. Despite the rhetoric of free trade, these come with the usual exclusions for certain sectors, such as agriculture, which the parties want to protect. Observers have argued that this focus on trade agreements does not constitute a trade policy that addresses the challenges set out in both IRs, such as climate change, supply chain resilience and a/the digital economy, and there has been little attempt by the UK government to assert new provisions into trade agreements that would represent taking leadership on such issues.⁴⁵ On development cooperation the merger of the Department for International Development with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office institutionalised the government's efforts to subordinate UK development assistance to its foreign policy aims. Together with the cuts to Overseas Development Assistance from 0.7% to 0.5%, ostensibly because of Covid-19, the removal of the independence of its primary development agency has damaged the UK's reputation as a leading donor.⁴⁶ The government's Strategy for International Development, published in May 2022, set out clearly how the UK intended to shift to a strategy away from funding multilateral agencies towards more bilateral programmes, as well as prioritising British Investment Partnerships mobilising funds from the private financial sector to invest in development projects. This is consistent with what the World Bank calls the Maximising Finance for Development agenda which has seen a greater involvement of finance capital in the funding and planning of development infrastructure, with pressures on recipient states to take on the risks involved in such investments.⁴⁷ The strategy is also infused with the strategic narrative of geopolitical contest meaning the UK needs to take a more geopolitical approach to development cooperation.⁴⁸

Britain as a security provider

⁴⁵ Michael Gasiorek (2022). "New government, new trade policy?" [New Government, new trade policy? « UK Trade Policy Observatory \(sussex.ac.uk\)](https://www.sussex.ac.uk/TradePolicyObservatory) consulted 21st September 2022.

⁴⁶ Joe Devanny and Philip. A. Berry, 'The Conservative Party and DFID: party statecraft and development policy since 1997', *Contemporary British History* 36(1), (2022) pp. 86-123

⁴⁷ Daniela Gabor, "The Wall Street Consensus." *Development and Change* 52 (2021) pp. 429-459.

⁴⁸ HM Government (2022) *The UK Government's Strategy for International Development* [The UK Government's Strategy for International Development – CP 676 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/106442/the-uk-government-strategy-for-international-development-cp-676.pdf) consulted 21st September 2022.

On top of the action areas identified above there has been a published shift in the UK's military doctrine outlined in both the Integrated Operating Concept and Defence in a Competitive Age papers.⁴⁹ They foreground the rapid technological change in the context of the intensifying geopolitical contest requiring more focus on how to engage in and counter hybrid forms of conflict through joint domain integration. The government also announced increases in defence spending with 2.2% GDP in 2020, 2.1% in 2022 and an intention to spend between 2.5 and 3% of GDP by 2030. This general trend is also present in the IR 2023, but there has so far been a rollback of this commitment with the 2022 Autumn Statement indicating spending would remain around 2%⁵⁰.

Britain as a force for good in protecting open societies and defending human rights

This now comes under the Open Societies agenda at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) which builds on the legacy of programmes such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and the Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact estimates that the total spend for the UK's democracy and human rights initiatives for 2015-16 to 2021-22 was around £1.37 billion (around 10% of the total aid spend). The commission undertook a review of the relevance, coherence and effectiveness of the use of UK aid to promote democracy and human rights. It noted that UK aid in this area shows relevance and effectiveness but despite high policy ambitions, lacks coherence. They further noted there was no clear strategy, no consistent budget commitments (highlighting cuts in 2021 and 2022) and loss of expertise after the FCDO merger.⁵¹ A deeper issue is that the UK government's conceptualisation of democracy is fundamentally shaped by neoliberalism, limiting its purview to individuals participating in the formal institutions of multi-party democracy within a market-based economic system rather than empowering individuals to exercise decision-making over economic and social policy. Indeed, as highlighted by critical scholarship, decades of neoliberal reforms have tended to reduce people's democratic influence over the state, economy and wider society, especially within the Global South where access to finance and credit is conditioned on adopting the policy prescriptions of international institutions.⁵² The inconsistent approach to authoritarian governments and human rights abusers in terms of diplomatic, economic and security relationships also shows that the values dimension of the UK's role conception is often instrumentalised for its geostrategic and economic aims. It is notable that while the IR 2023 emphasises the UK's intention to "create the conditions, structures and incentives necessary for an open and stable international order" it also concedes that it needs to "navigate with an understanding that not everyone's values or interests consistently align with our own. Today's international system cannot simply be reduced to 'democracy versus autocracy' – chartering a path for cooperation "without forcing zero-sum choices or encouraging bipolarity in the international system".⁵³ Furthermore, reference to the

⁴⁹ Ministry of Defence, *Integrated Operating Concept*, (Ministry of Defence, London, 2020); Ministry of Defence, *Defence in a Competitive Age* (Ministry of Defence, London, 2021)

⁵⁰ Janes (2022) "UK defence spending to remain above 2% of GDP" <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/uk-defence-spending-to-remain-above-2-of-gdp#:~:text=On%2017%20November%2C%20UK%20Chancellor,finances%20and%20reining%20in%20inflation> consulted 3rd January 2023.

⁵¹ Independent Commission for Aid Impact (2023). The UK's approach to democracy and human rights <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/review/the-uks-approach-to-democracy-and-human-rights/> accessed 1st June 2023.

⁵² Wendy Brown. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*. (Columbia University Press, 2019)

⁵³ HM Government, *Integrated Review*, 2023

UK being a force for good and a protector and defender of human rights is largely absent from IR 2023⁵⁴.

The UK also has potential issues with respect to being seen as following the rule of law, for example with respect to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In the NMSS, UNCLOS is centred as a key institution to be defended in relation to the South China Sea. While the strategy does not explicitly state the need for it to be defended from China, it points to “militarisation, coercion, and intimidation”.⁵⁵ A House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee on UNCLOS more explicitly framed China as the primary threat, and the Government’s response acknowledged that China’s claims (if based on history) are inconsistent with the UK “object[ing] to any claim not founded in UNCLOS”. However, the UK continues to occupy the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean, despite rulings by the International Court of Justice and International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea that the islands belong to Mauritius. While the UK has expressed an intention to negotiate with Mauritius, it is as yet unclear as to whether the UK will recognise international law and give up its claimed sovereignty. This has opened the UK to criticisms of hypocrisy regarding following international law.

While an update of the UK’s role conception in light of the IR is an important contribution, much of the literature has focused primarily on these dynamics of conception and claims. A central contention of this paper is that for the UK to perform a constructive role in Southeast Asia, it needs to gain legitimation from the key stakeholders in the region, and the focus on expectation needs to be more strongly centred. Indeed, many scholars point to the importance of expectations,⁵⁶ but treatments of expectations remain limited in important ways. First, there appears to be an implicit assumption that states accept the UK’s role conception, and expectations instead concerns whether the UK can fulfil the (already accepted) role as a global power. This is present in the analysis of Glencross and McCourt, who identify expectations but then turn to a relatively materialist analysis of whether the states can expect the UK to have the capacity to deliver on its role conceptions. Second, when the expectations of external actors are considered, there is a focus on major powers such as the US’s expectations,⁵⁷ or “international society” more broadly, rather than the regional states in which we argue legitimisation is just as important.⁵⁸ This is especially the case if, as Gaskarth argues, the UK were to implement a more network-oriented approach that foregrounds the partnerships alluded to both in IR 2021 and subsequent policy announcements rather than “an ad hoc approach ... [that] becomes a matter of continually forming and disbanding groups of partners, incurring high start-up costs, with little follow-through and the threat of defection due to the lack of commitment from members”.⁵⁹ The absence of thinking about what its regional partners expect could be particularly damaging to the legitimacy of the UK’s claims and ultimately how the tilt comes to be implemented. As Gaskarth goes on to argue the UK “would need to consider what states want the UK to offer them, where this ranks the UK in terms of network contributors, [and] how any change in contribution would affect patterns of social relations...”.⁶⁰ Analysing negotiations that occur around the UK’s role will not only identify these considerations, but also account for ongoing evolutions in the UK’s conceived role towards the region as a whole.

⁵⁴ The phrase ‘force for good’ is absent in IR 2023. Out of seven mentions of human rights in IR 2023, five are in relation to human rights violations in China, one in relation to supporting the human rights of the people of Russia, and one in relation to the UK’s broader commitment to human rights. This contrasts with a whole subsection on the UK as a global force for good and defender of human rights in IR 2021.

⁵⁵ UK Government, *National Maritime*, 2022

⁵⁶ Gaskarth, *Strategizing*, 2014; Glencross & McCourt, *Living Up*, 2018; Oppermann et al., *British*, 2019

⁵⁷ Bradford, *US Perspectives*, 2023

⁵⁸ Oppermann et al., *British*, 2019

⁵⁹ Gaskarth, *Strategy*, 2023

⁶⁰ Gaskarth, *Strategy*, 2023

Southeast Asian expectations of the UK's regional role

This section provides an overview of perceptions of the UK's role in Southeast Asia from key stakeholders in the region. It starts by outlining ASEAN's strategic narrative, highlighting how this differs with the UK's narrative. It analyses perceptions within Southeast Asia related to the UK's role claims showing that there is relatively little support for the UK to perform a leadership role as security provider, promoter of free trade or shaper of norms. It then discusses two alternative roles that Southeast Asian elites have ascribed to the UK, cooperative partner and capacity-builder.

ASEAN's strategic narrative

Although there is significant diversity in strategic outlook between the states in Southeast Asia,⁶¹ ASEAN has produced a strategic narrative which builds on a collective shared elite perspective of the Indo-Pacific, its key challenges and the role of ASEAN vis-a-vis other powers in managing regional order.⁶² This is revealed in the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, released in 2019 – partially in response to the proliferation of Indo-Pacific strategies announced by major powers and the subsequent need for ASEAN and its constituent states (though primarily Indonesia) to define and legitimate their own roles in the larger regional construct.⁶³ As it represents an aspirational document it does not set out concrete policies. However, it does give a clear sense of how ASEAN state elites view the current context and what they desire for the Indo-Pacific region.

International system and international order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Indo-Pacific as dynamic centre of the global system experiencing geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts - Economic opportunities but political risks inherent in region moving to zero sum rivalry <p>Envisions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An Indo-Pacific region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry - An Indo-Pacific region of development and prosperity for all - The importance of the maritime domain and perspective in the evolving regional architecture.
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⁶¹ For a recent discussion of individual country perspectives on security and US-China competition in Southeast Asia, which notes the diversity of approaches, see Lee Jaehyon (Ed) (2022). "Southeast Asian Perspectives of the United States and China: A SWOT Analysis." Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

⁶² ASEAN documents, such as the Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, emerge from a prolonged process of negotiation and consensus-building meaning that despite diversity of opinion within ASEAN, such documents and declarations can be taken as representing a collective position reached through elite consensus. See: Bhubhinder Singh and Henrick Z Tsjeng, 'ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific: Seizing the Narrative?', *RSIS Commentary No. 16*, (2020); Hoang Thi Ham 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific: Old Wine in New Bottle?' *ISEAS 2019/51*, (2019)..

⁶³ I Gusti Bagus Dharma Agastia 'Understanding Indonesia's role in the 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific': A role theory approach', *Asia & The Pacific Policy Studies* 7 (2019) pp. 293-305; Bhubhinder Singh and Henrick Z Tsjeng (2020) ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific: Seizing the Narrative?, *RSIS Commentary No. 16*; Hoang Thi Ha (2019) ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific: Old Wine in New Bottle?; Dewi Fortuna Anwar, 'Indonesia and the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific', *International Affairs* 96(1), (2021) pp. 111-129; Rory Medcalf, 'Indo-Pacific Visions', *Asia Policy*, 14(3), (2019) pp. 79-95.

Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maritime cooperation - peaceful settlement of disputes; sustainable management of marine resources; marine pollution; marine science collaboration - Connectivity - ASEAN Master Plan for Connectivity - Sustainable development goals 2030 - utilising digital economy; aligning regional development agendas with SDGs - Economic and other areas of cooperation - South-South trade; trade facilitation and logistics; digital economy; SMEs; science and technology; climate change; fourth industrial revolution; financial stability etc - Strengthening and optimization of ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) and others such as the relevant ASEAN Plus One mechanisms
Role conceptualisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ASEAN playing a central and strategic role in shaping the regional architecture and norms towards inclusivity and cooperation and away from rivalry

Table 3 - ASEAN’s strategic narrative and role conception based on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific⁶⁴

As is clear from table 3, ASEAN’s strategic narrative overlaps with the UK’s in terms of a recognition of geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts as well as some of the global challenges related to climate change and sustainability. There are also overlaps in policy areas, for example harnessing the technologies of the digital economy. ASEAN’s narrative views an inclusive and cooperative international order being central, with zero-sum competition a future risk which needs to be avoided. ASEAN’s strategic narrative also positions ASEAN in a central and strategic role in strengthening ASEAN-led processes which will act as the key mechanisms for shaping the Indo-Pacific towards an inclusive and cooperative order. This contrasts with the privileged place of the UK and its allies in leading the *open* international order that’s manifested in the UK’s strategic narrative. ASEAN state elites and other stakeholders also hold different and more complex views about China.

This is revealed in responses in the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies’ (ISEAS) report *The State of Southeast Asia 2023*, which is “gauge the views and perceptions of Southeast Asians on geopolitical developments affecting the region” and had 1308 respondents.⁶⁵ China is viewed by the majority of respondents as being the most influential economic and political power in Southeast Asia. Most are concerned about this growing influence and seek to balance this with a growing influence for the US, ASEAN and other partners. However, rather than being viewed in terms of the danger China poses, this is best understood in the context of the long-running preference within Southeast Asia for fostering a balance of influence between multiple external powers rather than being subject to any one

⁶⁴ ASEAN, *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, (Jakarta, ASEAN, 2019)

⁶⁵ Sharon Seah, Joanne Lin, Melinda Martinus, Sithanoxay Suvannaphakdy, and Pham Thi Phuong Thao. *The State of Southeast Asia Report 2023* (ISEAS, Singapore, 2023)

power's influence.⁶⁶ The levels of support for China's leadership in promoting free trade and the rules-based order are also comparable with those for the EU, and fairly high levels of confidence that respondents' country's relations with China will stay the same or improve rather than worsen. About a third of respondents trust China will "do the right thing" with respect to peace, stability and global governance, which is significantly below that for the US and especially Japan, but still reveals a diversity of opinion compared to the prevailing view of UK policymakers that China is a malign influence in these areas.⁶⁷

Southeast Asian views of the UK's role claims

The State of Southeast Asia survey also provides an indication of stakeholders' views on the UK which relate to its three role claims of leadership in promoting free and open economies; security provider; and force for good. In terms of leadership in championing global trade, the UK scores low amongst respondents with 4.3% mentioning the UK when asked who they have the most confidence in to lead on free trade. With respect to leadership in upholding the rules-based order and international law, the UK is mentioned by 6.9%, slightly ahead of China, Australia, and New Zealand, but well below the US (27.1%) and the EU (23%). This suggests the UK continues to have a relatively low (yet, growing) profile on this key aspect of its role conception. The free trade agreements signed between the UK and regional states outlined in table 2 show support from regional states for the UK as a trading partner, but considering they are primarily continuity agreements from EU FTAs, they do not affirm any leadership role for the UK in shaping norms and rules of regional trade.

On acting as a security provider, when asked what ASEAN should do in the face of US-China rivalry there has been a decrease in support for choosing a side (down from 11.1% to 6%) and an increase in support for finding a third party to support ASEAN (up from 16.2% in 2022 to 18.1%), but the strongest support remains for strengthening ASEAN (45.5%) and not choosing a side (30.5%).⁶⁸ As mentioned above, this is consistent with the long-running ASEAN approach of seeking to avoid direct involvement in great power rivalry and to achieve a balance in relations between the US and China, maximising autonomy and strategic space. This poses a challenge for the UK in its efforts to build security relationships in the region, emphasising the risk of an external former colonial power seeking to position itself too forcefully as part of a US-led coalition to counter China. Despite this, the UK has seen a slight increase in its regional profile as a potential third-party partner since the announcement of the tilt. When asked if ASEAN were to seek out third-party support, the UK was mentioned by 6.8% of respondents in 2023, down from 8.4% in 2021. This was slightly lower than for Australia (9.3%) but slightly higher than for South Korea (3.2%). AUKUS is not mentioned in 2023, but is in the 2022 report, "36.4% feel that the AUKUS arrangement will help balance China's growing military power, 22.5% feel that it will escalate the regional arms race, while 18.0% are of the view that it will weaken ASEAN centrality"⁶⁹. Responses from leaders in Indonesia and Malaysia at the time were critical of the nature of the AUKUS arrangement as reflecting Anglosphere exclusivity and arrogance. Interviewees for this paper also shared how the lack of prior warning of AUKUS' announcement was viewed poorly by Southeast Asian officials, even if they did not oppose the substance of the AUKUS agreement. However, allied planners, both American and British, should understand that, if the UK serves too

⁶⁶ Evelyn Goh (2007). "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies." *International Security* 32:3, (2007) pp. 113–57

⁶⁷ We recognize there are significant divergences in perception at an intra-ASEAN level, which can be seen in the breakdown in Seah et al., *The State*, 2023

⁶⁸ Sharon Seah, Joanne Lin, Melinda Martinus, Sithanoxay Suvannaphakdy, and Pham Thi Phuong Thao. *The State of Southeast Asia Report 2022* (ISEAS, Singapore, 2022)

⁶⁹ Seah et al., *The State*, 2022, p. 3

closely as a US operational surrogate and exercise partner, the value of this “third-option” status will diminish.⁷⁰ Perhaps in line with the above issues regarding Southeast Asian agency, concerns were also expressed about framing cooperation as part of the Indo-Pacific “tilt” rather than bilateral cooperation. With these caveats, an increased security presence for the UK in the region, alongside other European partners, has been welcomed by regional officials⁷¹.

What roles do Southeast Asian stakeholders envision for the UK?

Through our analysis we have identified two broad roles that Southeast Asian stakeholders ascribe to the UK: cooperative partner and capacity-builder. These roles support ASEAN’s strategic narrative and its own role conception at the centre of an inclusive and cooperative Indo-Pacific region. They are not unique to the UK but also apply to other dialogue partners. They de-centre ideas of the UK as a leader in norm promotion or direct security provider, and position the UK instead as a supporter of Southeast Asian developmental priorities and capacities. Cooperative partner is revealed in interviewees’ statements that the UK’s dialogue partnership status was secured by its demonstrated commitment to ASEAN cooperation. They expressed a desire for the UK to continue to show that commitment, listen and identify key needs in the region, and develop a niche area in which it can support ASEAN in a way that complements what other dialogue partners are doing.⁷² The capacity-builder role was also discussed by interviewees in terms of how the UK can bring its expertise and resources into concrete capacity-building initiatives.⁷³ This was linked with the point about the need for the UK to find a niche area where it can help build Southeast Asian states’ capacities.⁷⁴ Areas mentioned included clean energy, green growth, digital transformation, education,⁷⁵ and maritime cooperation,⁷⁶ which as we have seen is one of the priority areas in ASEAN’s Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

When looking at the ASEAN-UK Plan of Action and the various bilateral roadmap and dialogue statements between the UK and Southeast Asian states, capacity-building is mentioned repeatedly across multiple areas of cooperation.⁷⁷ This is notable in areas the UK has considered itself a leader, for example in human rights and democracy promotion and protection. The framing of these areas in the ASEAN-UK Plan of Action positions the UK and ASEAN working together through the strengthening of ASEAN agreements and mechanisms including the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on

⁷⁰ Bradford, *US Expectations*, 2023

⁷¹ Lynn Kuok (11 August 2021). “From withdrawal to Indo-Pacific ‘tilt’: Southeast Asia welcomes enhanced British security presence.” International Institute of Strategic Studies Analysis <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/08/southeast-asia-british-security-presence-indo-pacific-tilt> consulted 27th September 2022.

⁷² Interview with official involved in ASEAN negotiations, Friday 8th October 2022; Interview with ASEAN member-state foreign ministry official, Monday 25th April 2022

⁷³ Interview with ASEAN member-state foreign ministry official, Monday 25th April 2022; Interview with Indonesian maritime security practitioner, Thursday 15th December 2022; Interview with Thai maritime security practitioner, Wednesday 12th October 2022

⁷⁴ Interview with ASEAN member-state foreign ministry official, Monday 25th April 2022

⁷⁵ Interview with ASEAN member-state executive office official, Wednesday 2nd March 2022

⁷⁶ Interview with Indonesian maritime security practitioner, Thursday 15th December 2022; Interview with Thai maritime security practitioner, Wednesday 12th October 2022

⁷⁷ ASEAN-UK Plan of Action <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/asean-uk-dialogue-partnership-plan-of-action-2022-to-2026/plan-of-action-to-implement-the-asean-united-kingdom-dialogue-partnership-2022-to-2026>; UK-Thailand Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement [Fourth session of the United Kingdom-Thailand Strategic Dialogue: joint statement - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#); UK-Vietnam Joint Declaration [Joint declaration on UK - Viet Nam strategic partnership: forging ahead for another 10 years - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#); UK-Indonesia Partnership Roadmap [UK-Indonesia Partnership Roadmap 2022 to 2024 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#); Malaysia-UK Strategic Partnership statement [Malaysia–United Kingdom Strategic Dialogue, February 2022 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#).

Human Rights, ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), and the ASEAN Committee on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (ACMW). On human rights and democracy, the Plan of Action intends to “[s]upport the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms in ASEAN through regional dialogues, seminars and workshops, education and awareness raising activities, exchange of best practices, and other capacity building initiatives” and “[p]romote the cooperation between ASEAN and the UK through sharing of experience, knowledge, and best practices and other capacity building initiatives to promote and support efforts in strengthening democracy, good governance, and rule of law”.⁷⁸ The Plan of Action drafting involved the ASEAN side producing an initial draft drawing on similar documents with other dialogue partners, and then both sides making edits and additions until they reached a consensus on the final document.⁷⁹ This demonstrates that ASEAN negotiators had significant influence over the framing of the plan, meaning it reflects well ASEAN’s views on the UK’s roles as cooperative partner and capacity-builder and their efforts to shape the ASEAN-UK relationship in the direction of those roles. There are also significant similarities with the ASEAN-EU Plan of Action.⁸⁰

Maritime security is a sector where there is potential convergence between the UK’s and Southeast Asian goals, and where a process of role bargaining could lead to the UK adjusting its role conception to enact a role that is viewed as legitimate and constructive by key stakeholders in Southeast Asia.⁸¹ Maritime security features in many of the Strategic Dialogues. Beneath the surface of carrier group deployments, functional cooperation is growing. The HMS Tamar and Spey, for example, have been active in the provision of common goods in the region. There are growing training exercises between the UK’s Navy and regional navies, such as those planned with Indonesia in 2022-23 around Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief. Cooperation from the Royal Navy also includes contribution to Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) through an Information Fusion Centre Liaison Officer, with MDA more broadly an area of expertise to be shared with other states. There are also growing linkages between the UK’s Joint Maritime Security Centre (JMSC) and regional actors, creating partnerships between relevant agencies. On a regional level, the UK is joining India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative as the lead partner for the maritime security pillar, which will include coordinating work with states in Southeast Asia. Interviewees suggest that these commitments to providing common goods in interaction with regional stakeholders are better received by Southeast Asia,⁸² demonstrating a convergence around the cooperative partner role which the UK could develop more robustly. These activities are better accepted because they fulfil the UK’s desires to be a security provider, but largely avoid linkages to the prescribed strategic outlooks and instead shows an increasing willingness to engage with regional needs, negotiated through interaction with actors.⁸³

Where the UK requires further activity to achieve role legitimation is its role as capacity-builder in the maritime domain, where it is seeing sustained competition from other actors such as the EU. The Partnership Roadmap stresses the intention to “promote maritime security capacity building efforts, including on multilateral maritime law enforcement, through the delivery of regional courses, workshops and other knowledge exchange mechanisms to strengthen maritime cooperation, including

⁷⁸ Plan of action to implement the ASEAN-United Kingdom Dialogue Partnership (2022 to 2026) [Plan of action to implement the ASEAN-United Kingdom Dialogue Partnership \(2022 to 2026\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) consulted 28th September 2022.

⁷⁹ Interview with official involved in ASEAN negotiations, Friday 8th October 2022.

⁸⁰ ASEAN-EU plan of action <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/ASEAN-EU-Plan-of-Action-2023-2027-FINAL.pdf> consulted 02 June 2023.

⁸¹ It is important to note the UK is not uniformly approaching each country in region, and the maritime priority states are primarily Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, with additional focus on Thailand and Malaysia.

⁸² Interview with ASEAN member-state foreign ministry official, Monday 25th April 2022

⁸³ Interview with ASEAN member-state foreign ministry official, Monday 25th April 2022

on combating transnational crime”.⁸⁴ MDA capacity building is a key target area. There is also an environmental angle, given the fact that conservation features prominently, and that the UK has established a £500 million Blue Planet Fund to support developing countries globally in the protection of the marine environment.

Despite these intentions and capabilities, interviewees in the region suggest British capacity building itself is currently limited in the maritime security domain.⁸⁵ This is particularly problematic when compared to the efforts of other extra-regional powers. The EU, for example, has established the “Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia” (ESIWA) project, which is increasingly active in capacity-building efforts with Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia (with some interventions in Malaysia). It has also broadened the geographic scope of the Critical Maritime Routes Indian Ocean (EU CRIMARIO) to Southeast Asia, which provides access to the IORIS Maritime Domain Awareness platform as well as a plethora of training workshops and courses to foster information sharing. The EU is also focusing on human security in this domain, fully funding the International Labour Office’s ‘Ship to Shore Rights’ project tackling labour abuses in the regional fishing industry.

In this already crowded space, the UK’s activities are currently much more muted and exploratory, and interviewees state even the planned workshops, seminars, and dialogues do not necessarily meet regional expectations.⁸⁶ Concerns are presented around the topic and format of planned workshops and seminars, for example. The emphasis on “promoting a deeper understanding of UNCLOS” is seen as less useful to regional actors as they feel they understand UNCLOS sufficiently and it doesn’t reflect a willingness to learn what capacity is actually required. The use of “one-shot” workshops and seminars around non-propriety information is also seen as less useful, as they don’t create structures of sustained interaction that would allow partnerships to flourish and interactive dialogue around capacity-building targeting to occur.⁸⁷ The UK is well-placed to address these concerns, the RN has significant expertise and energy, while the JMSC is a world-leading maritime security coordination body, with both having a plethora of promising practices and experience to share. This is especially the case regards to information sharing due to its experiences with the National Maritime Information Centre (NMIC), yet if the UK wants to see convergence around this role, regional partners hope for more proactivity.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific is a crowded space, as extra-regional states intensify their interactions with this “super-region”.⁸⁸ Southeast Asia, at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, is on the receiving end of much of this attention, with different powers directing their role claims towards the region. For the UK, the Indo-Pacific (and Southeast Asia in particular) acts as a focal point for its post-Brexit role conceptions as leader in promoting free trade and open economies, force for good in protecting open societies and defending human rights, and security provider. In this paper, we have demonstrated such overarching claims face challenges due to the divergent expectations of regional powers, which have created role conflict and ultimately an emergent reevaluation of the UK’s role claims. In essence, we not only

⁸⁴ Plan of action to implement the ASEAN-United Kingdom Dialogue Partnership (2022 to 2026) [Plan of action to implement the ASEAN-United Kingdom Dialogue Partnership \(2022 to 2026\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/111111/Plan_of_action_to_implement_the_ASEAN-United_Kingdom_Dialogue_Partnership_(2022_to_2026).pdf) consulted 28th September 2022.

⁸⁵ Interview with Indonesian maritime security practitioner, Thursday 15th December 2022; Interview with Thai maritime security practitioner, Wednesday 12th October 2022

⁸⁶ Interview with ASEAN member-state foreign ministry official, Monday 25th April 2022

⁸⁷ Interview with ASEAN member-state foreign ministry official, Monday 25th April 2022

⁸⁸ Rory Medcalf ‘An Australia Vision of the Indo-Pacific and what it means for Southeast Asia’, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, (2019)

conclude with Jamie Gaskarth that the UK “needs to accept it is engaging with regional networks from a peripheral position...this is not to deny its potential influence, but to accept its limits and understand how it can realistically be exercised”, but that current divergent strategic narratives do not demonstrate full acceptance – leading to ongoing role conflicts.⁸⁹

We highlighted that while these role conflicts can be potentially problematic, there is instead an ongoing process of role negotiation between the UK and Southeast Asian nations over what role the UK can legitimately play in the region, and this accounts for ongoing evolutions in how the UK relates the region. Indeed, this growing willingness to listen derived from regional interaction can be seen in the differences across the two IRs. We highlighted two potential roles that are emerging through this interaction that are acceptable to both the UK and Southeast Asia: cooperative partner and capacity-builder. By focusing in on Maritime Security, a priority area for both the UK and Southeast Asia, we showed how these roles are being implemented. There is an increasing convergence, particularly around cooperative partner as reflected in IR 2023 which puts forth a new intention to “put our approach to the region on a long-term strategic footing, working with others and ensuring that we are respectful to and *guided by regional perspectives* [emphasis added]”.⁹⁰ There remain ongoing divergences around capacity-building activities, however, that provide continuing obstacles to the legitimation of the emergent capacity-builder role claim. The outcome of these negotiations will become especially important if the UK is to fully embrace its “patient diplomacy” marked by a “long term and sustained effort to revive old friendships and build new ones... investing in relationships based on patient diplomacy, on respect, on solidarity, and a willingness to listen”.⁹¹ This is particularly the case if the UK is to work together with – or distinguish themselves from – other extra-regional states such as the EU.

Ultimately, the paper argues that focusing only on role conceptions provides a limited explanation for the roles the UK wants to play, is playing, and will come to play in the region as it intensifies its activity. Instead, there needs to be greater focus on role expectations in role theory literature, and a greater focus on expectations and regional needs more broadly when formulating policy towards the Indo-Pacific “tilt”.

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