

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359623379>

Written evidence submitted to the committee on UK Defence and the Indo-Pacific

Technical Report · March 2022

CITATIONS

0

READS

24

3 authors:



Scott Edwards

University of Leeds

43 PUBLICATIONS 74 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE



Asmiati Malik

University of Birmingham

17 PUBLICATIONS 10 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE



Robert Yates

University of Bristol

11 PUBLICATIONS 31 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Political Engagement with the Orang Asli [View project](#)



The role of trusting relationships in a security community: the development of trust in ASEAN [View project](#)

Written evidence submitted by Dr Scott Edwards, Dr Asmiati Malik, and Dr Robert Yates.

This response is a collaborative submission by Dr. Robert Yates (University of Bristol), Dr. Asmiati Malik (Executive Office of the President of the Republic of Indonesia & Universitas Bakrie Indonesia), and Dr. Scott Edwards (University of Bristol & SafeSeas). Each of us research the Indo-Pacific at our respective institutions and engage with relevant actors in the region. The response is given in a personal capacity and reflects our personal opinions as academic researchers.

Rob Yates is Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Bristol. His research focuses on how regional order is negotiated and managed in the Indo-Pacific with a particular focus on the role of the ASEAN.

Asmiati Malik is Lecturer in International Political Economy at the Universitas Bakrie. Her research focuses on energy and maritime policy. She also works as advisor of International Political Economy to the Deputy Chief of Staff for Economy of the Executive Office of the President of the Republic of Indonesia.

Scott Edwards is a Post-Doctoral researcher on the Transnational Organised Crime at Sea project at the University of Bristol. His research focuses on responses to maritime insecurity in the Indo-Pacific. This builds upon his research on inter-state trust development in ASEAN's Security Community.

Summary

The UK's recent Integrated Review (IR) and Defence Command Paper (DCP) give important emphasis to the Indo-Pacific in the diplomatic, economic and defence posture of the UK. Much of the focus of recent debates on the Indo-Pacific Tilt has been on how the UK can develop links with established security partners in the region to counter China's growing influence. This focus is also evident in the UK's carrier strike group deployment and the announcement of AUKUS. The primacy of geopolitics and geoeconomics in the IR and DCP has been given further affirmation by Russia's aggressive invasion of Ukraine, which is likely to require renewed strategic focus on Europe. In this context, however, we emphasise the importance of Southeast Asia in considering the UK's longer-term strategic presence in the wider Indo-Pacific. We highlight the existing security relationships the UK has maintained, especially through the FPDA, as well as potential new forms of engagement, which can promote a comprehensive and supportive role for the UK in promoting Southeast Asian regional order. This will help the UK to realise a more independent middle-power role and avoid too closely linking to the geopolitical interests of the US in confronting China, which has raised concerns within the region.

- 1. Why is the Indo-Pacific important to the UK? What are its political, diplomatic, economic and operational interests in the region?**

- 1.1 The Indo-Pacific is the centre of geopolitical and geo-economic gravity in an increasingly multipolar world. It is seen as one of the key sites of competition between different political systems - framed in terms of democracy vs authoritarian - and economic systems - framed in terms of open vs protectionist. The Integrated Review (IR) sees greater UK engagement with the Indo-Pacific as vital for advancing the conception of the UK's role as actively shaping the international order in defence of the values of democracy and openness.
- 1.2 The IR also identifies the Indo-Pacific as an economic opportunity due to its connectivity, and a growing and increasingly prosperous market for trade in higher value-added goods and services. The region accounts for 65% of the world's population, contributes to 63% of the world's GDP, and sees 50% of global maritime trade.¹ It is likely that this will continue to grow – becoming an epicentre for the green and blue economies. Digital connectivity is also increasing rapidly. The majority of internet users are young, with 90% of them using mobile phones to access the internet and digital services. The region also accounts for the highest growing successful fintech² such as Gojek from Indonesia, which ranks fifth among largest fintech transaction worldwide³.
- 1.3 These factors present significant opportunities for the UK to develop its interests in the region. This depends on stability in the region and good order. Interestingly, although the IR highlights the growing weight and importance of middle powers navigating competition between major powers and shaping international order by working together, this is not discussed specifically in relation to the potential UK role. The conception of the UK as a middle power operating in collaboration with other middle powers is one that could be fruitful for the UK's interests in the Indo-Pacific and help to avoid too closely identifying with US-led efforts to confront China. This may become increasingly important were the US to concentrate its efforts more strongly across the Atlantic due to ongoing Russian aggression.

2. What progress has been made on the goals for UK Defence as part of the Indo-Pacific Tilt as set out in the Integrated Review and the Defence Command Paper?

- 2.1 The IR and Defence Command Paper (DCP) identify four major objectives for the UK: sustaining strategic advantage through science and technology; shaping the open international order of the future; strengthening security and defence at home and overseas; and building resilience at home and overseas. The DCP aims to support these objectives in the Indo-Pacific through maintaining a persistent forward presence and strengthening alliances and partnerships to boost interoperability and burden sharing. The UK has a long-running strategic presence in Southeast Asia which is a legacy of its colonial involvement in the region. This provides a foundation upon which to build that would be conducive to the expressed aims of shaping international order and regional

¹ https://www.orfonline.org/research/security-economy-and-ecology/#_edn6

² <https://www.statista.com/topics/7970/fintech-in-asia-pacific/#dossierKeyfigures>

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/667756/leading-fintech-deals>

security/resilience, but also poses challenges in ensuring that the type of defence engagement is sensitive to the UK's colonial past.

2.2 The UK already has strong mechanisms in place for regional cooperation, and the renewed focus on these is indicative of some good progress towards strengthening security overseas. Singapore and Malaysia are both part of Five Power Defence Agreement (FPDA), the principal framework relating to Britain's security engagement in Southeast Asia (SEA). Despite perceptions of it being anachronistic and a lack of broad awareness of its benefits, it is notable for its role in training and conventional warfare exercises. Through these, the FPDA has built confidence among its members, developed professional military skills, synergised capabilities, and contributed to developing military-to-military relations. It does this with a defensive posture. Progress could be developed further. At the recent celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the FPDA, the only asset the UK had sent - the HMS Diamond - could not leave port due to technical reasons. While it did take part in various drills prior, this was a symbolic absence and demonstrated a lack of forward presence in the region.

2.3 The UK intends to have periodic deployments of carrier groups. It has also forward-deployed two River-class Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) - HMS Tamar and HMS Spey. These have fulfilled an important burden-sharing role; delivering aid to Tonga, patrolling Marine Protected Areas, and assisting in the interdiction of criminal actors at sea. There are further plans to deploy a Littoral Reponse Group (LRG) in 2023 which consist of an amphibious landing ship, a supply vessel and a destroyer or frigate and is likely use the support base in Oman. These deployments are viewed as enabling a small but flexible UK capability for supporting a range of maritime operations including Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), training exercises, countering blue crime and other defence diplomacy activities. It is likely that the UK will have to seek further opportunities to facilitate this persistent forward presence. Brunei hosts a defence garrison as well as the Jungle Warfare Training School, and Singapore hosts British Defence Singapore Support Unit, a naval logistics facility which can support RN deployments in the region. In the coming years, the UK aims to forward-deploy a Type 31 Inspiration-class frigate currently in production, which is a larger vessel that could pose some challenges in terms of basing. Singapore and Brunei are possible hosts operationally, but there are potential political risks considering the ASEAN norm discouraging hosting external military presence.⁴

⁴ Bradford, J. Naval Engagements Will Brace the United Kingdom's Indo-Pacific Tilt, CSIS Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative, March 2021 <https://amti.csis.org/naval-engagements-will-brace-the-united-kingdoms-indo-pacific-tilt/#:~:text=The%20United%20Kingdom%20also%20plans,the%20Royal%20Navy's%20regional%20presence>

⁵ Storey, I and Hoang, T.H. 'Global Britain' and Southeast Asia: Progress and Prospects, ISEAS Perspective, 2021, Issue 130 <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-130-global-britain-and-southeast-asia-progress-and-prospects-by-ian-storey-and-hoang-thi-ha/>

2.4 Defence diplomacy and multilateralism are areas where the UK can boost its engagements, but progress here is currently insufficient. The UK applied for observer status in several Expert Working Groups (EWG) of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) in 2018, but was vetoed by Russia and China. The rules on external engagements have now been changed as a means to restore ASEAN Centrality, and ASEAN now exercises control over external engagement with the ADMM+. The UK has not yet upgraded its application from observer status to membership.⁵

2.5 If we consider defence progress to include the objectives of shaping the future open international order and the UK's desired role in strengthening security and resilience in SEA, the picture is more mixed. Responses from the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies' (ISEAS) report *The State of Southeast Asia 2022* provide an insight into how the UK is perceived on key questions of geopolitics and geoeconomics. The report is "designed to highlight the perceptions of the region's policymakers, academics, researchers, businesspeople, media personnel, and civil society activists towards a range of issues affecting Southeast Asia" and had 1677 respondents.⁶ In terms of leadership in championing free trade, the UK scores low amongst respondents with 1.8% (up from 1.3% in 2021) mentioning the UK when asked who they have the most confidence in. With respect to leadership in upholding the rules-based order and international law, the UK is mentioned by 3.4%, slightly ahead of Australia and New Zealand, but well below the US (36.6%), EU (16.6%) and China (13.6%). This suggests there is much work to do to raise the UK's profile, and also shows a more complex range of opinions within the region on China's relationship to the rules-based order and international law than set out in the UK's IR.

3 What is the benefit of closer defence cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states and how can this best be achieved?

3.1 ASEAN remains the key Indo-Pacific regional institution. It has embraced the idea of the Indo-Pacific to some degree through its 'Indo-Pacific Outlook' (AIPO), but it is also posed as a threat to ASEAN's centrality. This centrality is taken very seriously in the region. A desire to guide their own destinies was one of the original reasons for ASEAN's creation, when the Cold War threatened to turn Southeast Asia into a theatre of a larger extra-regional conflict. They focus primarily on 'ASEAN-led mechanisms' as being at the core of the AIPO and encourage partners to engage with this wider region through cooperation with ASEAN. The UK should therefore take its status as Dialogue Partner (DP) seriously so as not to create tensions by de-centring the institution in a broader construct led by those outside of the region. Only through closer engagement with ASEAN will the UK gain the legitimacy it requires for sustained regional defence cooperation.

⁶ Seah, S. et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2022* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022) https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/The-State-of-SEA-2022_FA_Digital_FINAL.pdf

3.2 ASEAN is also essential for functional cooperation in key sectors for UK defence.

Focusing primarily on geopolitical competition belies many of the serious threats facing this region. The Indo-Pacific is not bound together by terrestrial geographies and relationships but by oceanic ones. It presents a series of specifically maritime security challenges, such as key shipping chokepoints in the Malacca and Bab-el-Mandeb Straits, extremist violence in the Sulu and Celebes Seas and Strait of Hormuz, as well as multiple expressions of blue crime including piracy, smuggling of various sorts, illegal fishing, and pollution.⁷ The UK focuses on all of these in its own Maritime Security Strategy. Out of the 112 Indo-Pacific regional fora focused in some way on maritime security - including 'non-traditional' issues such as blue crimes and pollution – ASEAN leads 34.⁸ This includes the important ASEAN Maritime Forum, ASEAN Expanded Maritime Forum, ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces Meeting, and ASEAN – EU Experts Meeting on Maritime Security. There is also an emergent ASEAN Coastguard Forum bringing together maritime constabulary forces. ASEAN further wields significant influence over non-ASEAN institutions due to the legitimacy attached to the regional body. ASEAN is therefore well-placed to contribute significantly to safe and secure oceans in the region at a time where external interventions are not always welcomed. The Contact Group on Maritime Crime in the Sulu and Celebes Sea led by the UNODC, for example, has not met expectations as regional states do not perceive themselves as having ownership. If the UK wants to contribute to maritime governance through capacity building and knowledge exchange, it needs to engage with ASEAN.

3.3 This is also just example of a web of arrangements of which ASEAN sits at the centre. ASEAN has other major forms of political and security cooperation, including the Treaty of Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters (MLAT) and the ASEAN Convention on Counter Terrorism (ACCT). There is a startling array of meetings focused on cooperation in eradicating transnational crimes, with other meetings focused on sectors as broad as law, migration, the environment, and consular affairs. Developing partnerships that are considered strategic for ASEAN countries, such as combating cybercrime and human slavery, countering terrorism, securing trade hubs and financial integrity, and providing HADR, will contribute to the UK's ability to develop resilience in region.

3.4 The SCS is an essential trading hub for many countries. Data from UNCTAD shows that 80% of global trade, worth up to US\$3.37 trillion, is transported through the SCS, where the main traders are China, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Germany and Malaysia. Logistic costs will only increase if it is dominated by one power. Resilience and security in the Indo-Pacific depends on the stability of the SCS, and cooperation

⁷ Bueger, C., Edmunds, T., Edwards, S., (2021) Innovation and New Strategic Choices Refreshing the UK's National Strategy for Maritime Security, *RUSI Journal*

⁸ Edwards, S., (2022) Fragmentation, Complexity and Cooperation: Understanding Southeast Asia's Maritime Security Governance, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*

with ASEAN is important to ensure this. Beginning in 1992 with ASEAN's Declaration on the SCS, ASEAN 'urge[d] all parties concerned to exercise restraint... [and] emphasize[d] the necessity to resolve all sovereignty and jurisdictional issues pertaining to the SCS by peaceful means, without resort to force'. Since then, the SCS has taken centerstage at many of ASEAN's annual Summits, Ministerial Meetings, Foreign Ministers' Meetings, and Defense Ministers' Meetings. While much of this has not resulted in tangible outcomes, areas of functional cooperation are also emphasized, such as the safety of maritime navigation and communication, protection against pollution of the marine environment, coordination of search and rescue operations, efforts towards combatting piracy and armed robbery as well as collaboration in the campaign against illicit trafficking in drugs. Engagement with ASEAN provides opportunities for the UK to pursue its essential SCS policy.

3.5 The UK should recognise that its interactions with ASEAN are unlikely to be transformative and have realistic goals for its engagement. These may be more limited than hoped for, but the process of ASEAN's diplomacy has been essential for gradual trust building and should not be readily dismissed despite these limitations. In particular, the UK shouldn't seek to wield influence too directly through its DP status but rather signal its commitment to support ASEAN on a range of development and governance issues. Partnerships can be developed through sharing knowledge and conducting training for law enforcement, military personnel, and selected civil servants, for example.

4 What challenges are there for UK Defence in its Indo-Pacific tilt, both in terms of achieving its goals and operating in the region?

4.1 As mentioned above, if the UK were to further develop its persistent forward presence this would require a stronger logistics chain and interoperability with partners that is currently lacking.

4.2 Bases and primarily defence-led cooperation are not necessarily a solution to this problem and may cause significant suspicion concerning the UK's motivations. The UK was one of the primary colonizers of Southeast Asia, and overt expansion into the region is likely to still cause some suspicion. An indicator of this can be seen in the case of Japan, where suspicions of Japan have endured despite Japan investing heavily in the region (which the UK has not yet done). This suspicion concerning motivations is exacerbated by the fact that SEA does not want to invite great power competition into the region, or be forced to overtly choose sides at a time China provides many of the region's economic opportunities. An indicator of this is the question of what ASEAN should do in the face of US-China rivalry. There has been an increase in support for finding a third party to support ASEAN (up from 12.9% in 2021 to 16.2%) or choosing one of the two sides (up from 3.4% to 11.1%), but the strongest support remains for strengthening ASEAN (46.1%) and not choosing a side (26.6%).⁹ This is

⁹ Seah, S. et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2022* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022)

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 is important for the UK to consider 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. The lack of regional appetite for this can also be seen in the perceptions of AUKUS, “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”. Interestingly for the UK, however, when asked if ASEAN were to seek out third party support, the UK was mentioned by 8.4% of respondents, up from 2.9% in 2021, with notable increases of responses from Thailand, Philippines and Cambodia. This suggests that the ‘tilt’ has at least raised the prospect of the UK as a third party option even if this is something most respondents think ASEAN should avoid.

4.3 Competition over influence should not be understated, and remains a significant barrier to UK aspirations in the Indo-Pacific. China is an obvious example of a power that would (and has) sought to exclude the UK when possible. Narratives about greater NATO involvement in the region following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is likely to exacerbate this further. Competition will (and has) also arisen from friendly or allied nations. India is expanding its relations, as is Japan, the US, and the EU. Limited diplomatic capacity will mean ASEAN will have to make choices concerning who it prioritises, but the UK’s late realignment to the region means there will be an uphill struggle for influence. Other countries have been more consistently demonstrating their value for a sustained period of time. Japan, for example, is a significant donor for ASEAN projects and is strongly involved in capacity building, while ASEAN and the EU have a broad range of consultative arrangements. The UK faces the daunting prospect of catching up which will only be more problematic if they approach the region with a one-dimensional focus on defence. Sustainable partnerships with key powers such as Indonesia will make this obstacle less daunting.

4.4 Finally, the region is extremely complex, which manifests in two ways – frustrating diplomatic processes and a confusing structure. The ‘ASEAN Way’ of diplomacy, emphasising consensus, face-saving, and informality can be difficult to navigate. Western diplomats often refer to the initial difficulty of adapting to this context. This is exacerbated by the fact there is still a degree of taboo concerning external involvement into domestic contexts, and that countries in the region are domestically focused. These diplomatic norms have adapted to accommodate diverse and often conflicting positions between ASEAN members, whilst seeking to present a sense of ASEAN unity and neutrality to avoid undue external involvement. This can be seen, for example, in the long-running issues surrounding ASEAN’s management of Myanmar’s human rights record, treatment of Rohingya and recent coup. Ongoing domestic and regional challenges are

likely to further embed this opaque process. ASEAN is also extremely complex. As mentioned, even with maritime security there are 34 ASEAN-led initiatives that touch some way on maritime security. There are hundreds of meetings across different themes, covering a multitude of sectors. One challenge the UK faces is identifying which sectors they want to prioritise and which working groups, arrangements, or meetings pose the most utility for UK defence. Diplomatic capacity needs to be developed to facilitate a fuller working with ASEAN, but the UK currently has insufficient capacity (or willingness) to navigate these.

4th March 2022