

Research Briefing

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Integrated Review 2021: The defence tilt to the Indo-Pacific October

“Defence is an essential part of the UK’s integrated offer to the region.”

Defence in a Competitive Age,

March 2021

In March 2021 the Government set out its security, defence, development and foreign policy and its vision of the UK’s role in the world over the next two decades by publishing: [Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#) and the command paper [Defence in a Competitive Age](#).

These documents describe a “tilt to the Indo-Pacific.” A clear signal of this new intent, and the Government’s commitment to “Global Britain”, is the first deployment of the HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier strike group to the Indo-Pacific in 2021.

This paper explores what this means for UK defence, explains the current UK defence presence in the Indo-Pacific and discusses some of the concerns raised about the tilt. It is one of a [series that the Commons Library](#) is publishing on the Integrated Review (hereafter the review) and the command paper. It was first published in May 2021 and has been updated to reflect the [AUKUS partnership](#) announced in September 2021.

1

Why tilt to the Indo-Pacific?

The Government says the UK needs to engage with the Indo-Pacific more deeply for its own security. The review describes the region as being at the “centre of intensifying geopolitical competition with multiple potential flashpoints.” These flashpoints include unresolved territorial disputes in [the South China Sea and East China Sea](#), [nuclear proliferation](#), [climate change](#) as

a potential driver of conflict, and threats from terrorism and serious organised crime.

The use of Indo-Pacific rather than Asia-Pacific is very deliberate in the Integrated Review, according to Dr Lynn Kuok, co-author of the International Institute of Strategic Studies' (IISS) Asia-Pacific regional security assessment, who says it reflects how India has become a “very important player in the Indo-Pacific mix, and this has a balancing effect in the wider region, particularly vis-à-vis China.”¹

The impact of China’s [military modernisation](#) and growing international assertiveness within the Indo-Pacific and beyond will, the Government says, “pose an increasing risk to UK interests.”² The review describes the Indo-Pacific as being of increasing geopolitical and economic importance over the next decade, and suggests competition will play out in “regional militarisation, maritime tensions and contest over the rules and norms linked to trade and technology.”

The US has long had a significant military presence in the region and under President Obama’s administration “pivoted” to Asia. NATO’s Secretary-General says the rise of China is a “defining issue” for the transatlantic community and says the Alliance should deepen relationships with close partners like Australia and Japan.³

That much of the UK’s trade with Asia depends on shipping routes that go through maritime choke points is also highlighted. Choke points are narrow channels of water at strategic locations on major shipping routes. They can be vulnerable to blockages, either intentional, by a naval blockade or the placing of mines for example, or unintentional, as in March 2021 in the Suez Canal.



¹ [“Uncorrected oral evidence: The UK’s security and trade relationship with China”](#), Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, 14 April 2021, q49

² [Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), Cabinet Office, 16 March 2021

³ [“NATO 2030: future-proofing the Alliance”](#), Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Munich Security Conference 2021, NATO, 19 February 2021

2

What does the tilt mean for defence?

1 UK defence commitments

The Defence Command Paper explains how the UK's armed forces will contribute to the tilt to the Indo-Pacific. The Ministry of Defence will:

- Increase our capacity building and training across the Indo-Pacific, delivered through longer and more consistent military deployments and by better leveraging our existing regional facilities.
- Maximise regional engagement as part of the Carrier Strike Group deployment in 2021.
- Increase our maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific region through the deployment of Offshore Patrol Vessels from 2021, Littoral Response Group from 2023 and Type 31 frigates later in the decade, including to uphold freedom of navigation.
- Make a bigger and more consistent contribution to the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA).
- Pursue closer defence cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states.
- Guarantee our regional access through existing UK bases, including the British Indian Ocean Territory, access to allied facilities, and the development of an enhanced training facility at Duqm, Oman.
- Deepen and expand defence industrial relationships in the region, including with Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea and India, underpinned by co-operation on science and technology. We will also enhance our programmes of exercises, exchanges and capability development with these key partners.
- Expand our Defence Attaché and Advisor network and build a new British Defence Staff in Canberra to work alongside the existing Defence Staff in Singapore and coordinate Defence activity across the region.⁴

2.1

Building capacity and training elsewhere

“Persistent engagement” is an important part of the modernisation of defence, as set out in the integrated review. The First Sea Lord (the head of the Royal Navy) says this means [“deploying more of our forces overseas more often and for longer periods of time.”](#) The review says a greater global

⁴ [Defence in a Competitive Age](#), Ministry of Defence, 22 March 2021

presence will improve the UK's understanding of international events, help the UK detect and tackle problems earlier, and provide a foundation to respond more assertively to threats. The defence command paper says this approach will demonstrate a much greater commitment to allies than the current model of intermittent, ad hoc visits, exercises and training packages.

The UK armed forces already participate in exercises with nations of the Indo-Pacific. The RAF, for example, held its first ever joint exercises with the Republic of Korea Air Force and US Air Force in November 2016.⁵

2.2 An increased maritime presence

The defence command paper outlines plans to increase the maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific by deploying:

- Offshore patrol vessels from 2021
- The Littoral Response Group from 2023⁶
- Type 31 frigates later in the decade

Baroness Goldie, Minister of State for Defence, has suggested the ships will not be permanently deployed to a fixed base. Rather the forces will “intentionally operate asymmetrically, without a nominated base.” The Minister said they will use “existing UK, allied and partner facilities around the region enabled by our existing global support agreements.”⁷

Neither the tilt nor the focus on the maritime is entirely unexpected; the Royal Navy has in recent years been looking eastward. Prior to the integrated review, both the current First Sea Lord and his predecessor discussed the need for UK presence in Asia-Pacific. Reasons included Chinese maritime expansion and growing Britain's trading partnerships.⁸

In 2019 Admiral Tony Radakin, the First Sea Lord, identified forward presence as one of his priorities, saying: “this is about being able to demonstrate a global navy, project influence and respond to threats more quickly.”⁹ In practical terms, this may see the Navy expanding the number of ships based overseas. This shift is already evident in the Persian Gulf, where a Type 23

⁵ [“‘Invincible shield’ – First ever UK-US-ROK combined air exercise”](#), Defence-aerospace, 8 November 2016

⁶ A Littoral Response Group is defined as a “bespoke force assigned to a geographic area, that contains dedicated shipping, helicopters and boats”, [Defence in a Competitive Age](#), Ministry of Defence, 22 March 2021

⁷ [HL14443](#), 1 March 2021

⁸ [Speech by Admiral Sir Philip Jones](#), First Sea Lord, DSEI maritime conference 2017, 11 September 2017; [Speech by Admiral Tony Radakin](#), First Sea Lord, DSEI, 11 September 2019

⁹ [Speech by Admiral Tony Radakin](#), First Sea Lord, DSEI, 11 September 2019

frigate now resides, alongside the minehunter fleet that has been permanently based in Bahrain since 2003.¹⁰

This shift was confirmed in September 2021 when two of the Navy's newest Offshore Patrol Vessels, HMS Tamar and HMS Spey, left the UK for a five-year long deployment to the Indo-Pacific. As Baroness Goldie suggested, they won't be assigned a permanent home in the region. Rather, they will make use of ports and facilities across their patrol area of the Indian and Pacific oceans. Crews will rotate from the UK.¹¹

The Royal Navy has long been active in the western half of the Indo-Pacific in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean, participating in the various multinational [counter-piracy operations](#) off the Horn of Africa around the 2010-12 period.¹² In 2018 the UK [sent three warships to Asia-Pacific](#); the first time a Royal Navy warship travelled that far in five years.¹³ Navy vessels have supported UN sanctions enforcement operations off the Korean Peninsula.¹⁴

The UK has also built a new dry dock facility in Oman to support future naval deployments east of Suez outside of the Persian Gulf.

Carrier strike group deployment

HMS Queen Elizabeth, the UK's newest aircraft carrier, travelled to the Indo-Pacific, via the Mediterranean, on her first operational deployment in 2021. It was the first UK carrier group deployment to the Pacific in more than 20 years.¹⁵ Full details of the group's deployment were given in an [oral statement](#) on 26 April 2021.

The review said the carrier group will demonstrate the UK's ability to operate with allies and partners and project "cutting-edge military power" in support of NATO and international maritime security. It will be one of the most visible symbols of the Government's "Global Britain" narrative.

The carrier group included Type 45 destroyers and Type 23 anti-submarine frigates, support vessels, a submarine, plus a Dutch frigate and US destroyer.

¹⁰ [FOI2015/10140](#), 14 December 2015. Type 23 frigate HMS Montrose is [permanently deployed in the Persian Gulf until 2022](#). Previously frigates would spend several months in the Gulf before returning to the UK.

¹¹ ["Patrol ships bid farewell to Portsmouth as they begin Indo-Pacific deployment"](#), Royal Navy, 7 September 2021

¹² ["Piracy at sea: overview and policy responses"](#), Commons Library paper SN03794, 28 February 2012

¹³ Prior to 2018, the last time a Royal Navy warship was in the Pacific was the destroyer [HMS Daring](#) in 2013. HMS Illustrious was also deployed to the Philippines to help in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan in the same year.

¹⁴ ["Royal Navy vessel identifies evasion of North Korea sanctions"](#), Ministry of Defence, 5 April 2019

¹⁵ The last major UK carrier strike group to Asia-Pacific was Ocean Wave 97 to demonstrate ["the UK's continued commitment to the Asia-Pacific region after the handover of Hong Kong"](#). It was led by HMS Illustrious, who was [present for the handover](#). HMS Illustrious was sent to the [Philippines in 2013](#) to provide humanitarian assistance after Typhoon Haiyan, but this was not a carrier group deployment and she had no fixed-wing aircraft onboard.

Aircraft included a mix of RAF/Royal Navy and US Marine Corps F-35 Lightning combat aircraft, Wildcat and Merlin helicopters.

Freedom of navigation

The Integrated Review makes it clear that preserving freedom of navigation is essential to the UK's national interest. Dr Alessio Patalano of the Department of War Studies at King's College, noting the review's emphasis of the importance of unfettered use of shipping lanes, says that "without maritime stability the openness of the international order stands critically vulnerable."¹⁶

However, sailing through contested waters can prompt diplomatic spats. The US Navy has increased the number of such sailings in recent years specifically to challenge China's claims in the South China Seas. The US Navy conducted nine freedom of navigation operations in 2019, the highest number since 2015.¹⁷ China has described past operations as [unlawful intrusions into its waters](#).

What does "preserving freedom of navigation" mean?

Freedom of navigation refers to the long-standing principle of freedom of navigation in international waters. The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) defines many of the rights and responsibilities of states in the use of the world's oceans. It distinguishes between territorial sea, exclusive economic zones (which can extend up to 200 nautical miles from the coast) and the high seas. UNCLOS clarifies the rules regarding passage through narrow straits.¹⁸ The Ministry of Defence's publication UK Maritime Power discusses how this applies:

Freedom of navigation operations in peacetime are one means by which maritime forces maintain the freedom of the seas for maritime trade, ensuring that the UNCLOS provisions are respected.¹⁹

HMS Albion [conducted a US style freedom of navigation operation](#) in the Paracel islands in August 2018. HMS Richmond, part of the carrier group, sailed through the Taiwan Strait in September 2021.

The Minister for Asia set out the [UK Government's approach to freedom of navigation in the South China Sea](#) in an adjournment debate in September

¹⁶ Dr Alessio Patalano, "The Indo-Pacific 'tilt' and the return of British maritime strategy", part of "the Integrated Review in context: A Strategy fit for the 2020s?", School of Security Studies and Centre for Defence Studies, King's College London, July 2021

¹⁷ "[In challenging China's claims in the South China Sea, the US Navy is getting more aggressive](#)", Defense News, 5 February 2020

¹⁸ "[Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea: A Practical Guide](#)" published by the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, in 2017, provides a helpful explanation of definitions and illustrated discussions of US Navy freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea.

¹⁹ Joint Doctrine Publication 0-10 UK maritime power, Ministry of Defence, November 2017, fifth edition, para 2.13

2020. A document explaining the [UK Government's position on legal issues arising in the South China Sea](#) was deposited in the Commons Library on the same day.

2.3

A bigger contribution to the Five Power Defence Arrangements

The UK will “reinforce our commitment to the Five Power Defence Arrangements.”²⁰ The FPDA turns 50 in 2021 and the carrier strike group will participate in events marking the anniversary, including the annual Exercise Bersama Lima.

The Five Power Defence Arrangements were agreed in 1971 after the withdrawal of British forces from Malaysia and Singapore.²¹ The arrangements allow the participating member states (UK, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore and New Zealand) to consult in the event of an external threat to, or an attack on, either Malaysia or Singapore. There is no specific commitment for military intervention in such an event.

Euan Graham, IISS Shangri-La Dialogue Senior Fellow for Asia-Pacific Security, says the FPDA remains a “living, breathing part of the Asia-Pacific defence ecosystem, particularly in Southeast Asia” and remains valued by all five member states.²²

The member states reaffirmed their commitment to the FPDA in a rare [joint statement](#) in December 2020.²³ The statement discussed the growth in scope and depth of the FPDA to include humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counter-terrorism and maritime security.

2.4

Closer cooperation with ASEAN

The review says the UK will “pursue closer defence cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states.” ASEAN consists of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

It is unclear what form that closer defence cooperation will take and whether it will be through the ASEAN structure or bilaterally. A [factsheet on UK-ASEAN relations](#) updated after publication of the command paper emphasised bilateral relations via the defence Attachés and advisors network, naval

²⁰ [Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), Cabinet Office, 16 March 2021

²¹ The FPDA are a series of bilateral accords and not a single treaty.

²² “[The Five Power Defence Arrangements at 50: what next?](#)”, IISS, 10 December 2020

²³ [FPDA Defence Ministers' joint statement](#), Ministry of Defence, 27 November 2020

deployments, and training. Units of the carrier strike group will visit ASEAN member states during its deployment in 2021.²⁴

2.5

Existing UK bases and facilities

The UK has a relatively minimal permanent presence in the Indo-Pacific. It has long had a naval facility in Singapore for visiting warships and in 2018 opened a new facility in Oman to support naval deployments outside of the Persian Gulf.

The UK also has both naval and airfield facilities in Bahrain and Qatar. Diego Garcia in the middle of the Indian Ocean also provides a potential support option. The army's main presence is in Brunei, the home of the army's jungle warfare school and a permanently stationed infantry battalion of Gurkhas.

The review, and subsequent ministerial comments, do not suggest plans to significantly expand the UK's network of military bases in the region.²⁵ There are significant hurdles to any such expansion, not least the financial outlays, the political ramifications of location, and the appetite of a host nation (e.g. Singapore or Japan) of a significant UK naval presence.²⁶ A full description of the UK's military presence can be found in the annex.

2 A return to “East of Suez”

Commentary about the Royal Navy's increased maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific sometimes refers to a “return to East of Suez.” The phrase refers to the UK's decision in the late 1960s to withdraw from Singapore, Malaysia and the Persian Gulf. Then Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, explained the withdrawal by telling the Commons that defence “must not be asked in the name of foreign policy to undertake commitments beyond its capability” and announced an acceleration of plans to withdrawal forces from South-East Asia and the Persian Gulf.²⁷

Wilson said the intent was that by the end of 1971, the UK would not be maintaining military bases outside Europe and the Mediterranean.²⁸ Suez, located in Egypt, became the commonly used reference point for this shift in the UK's global military presence. It has remained in common usage; in 2014

²⁴ [HC Deb 26 April 2021 c69](#)

²⁵ [HL14443](#), 1 March 2021

²⁶ Ian Storey, “[Can the UK achieve its naval ambitions in the Indo-Pacific?](#)” *The Diplomat*, 7 November 2020

²⁷ [HC Deb 16 January 1968 c1580](#)

²⁸ [HC Deb 16 January 1968 c1580](#); “[A brief guide to previous British defence reviews](#)”, House of Commons Library paper, CBP-7313, 26 February 2020.

Boris Johnson, then Foreign Secretary, described the policy of disengagement East of Suez as a “[mistake](#)” and announced plans to reverse that policy, albeit his focus was more on the Persian Gulf than Asia-Pacific.

2.6 Deepen and expand defence trade relationships

Deepening trade relations with countries of the Indo-Pacific is one of the drivers for the tilt. Asia-Pacific is a growing market for defence and security exports. Defence exports to the region rose from two per cent in 2018 to six per cent in 2019 and security exports accounted for 11 per cent of all UK security exports in 2019, according to the latest Government statistics.²⁹

From a defence industry perspective, the tilt is helpful in forging links with large and potentially lucrative markets. The carrier deployment will play a role in this; navy ships have long been used to host and showcase military technology.

Responding to MPs concerns that the tilt is “about chasing commerce rather than countering threats”, as suggested by Stewart Malcolm McDonald, the Defence Secretary said he is “not ashamed” the deployment is linked to trade, adding: “we cannot separate trade from security. We need to secure our trade.”³⁰

2.7 Defence Attaché network

Defence engagement became a funded, core task of the Ministry of Defence in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review. Since then, the UK has set up a British Defence Staff office for Asia Pacific based in Singapore.

A new British Defence Staff in Canberra will work alongside the existing Defence Staff in Singapore and coordinate activity across the region.

²⁹ [“UK defence and security statistics for 2019”](#), Department for International Trade, 6 October 2020

³⁰ [HC Deb 26 April 2021 c75](#)

3

Risks and opportunities of the tilt

The new approach involves some risk and has prompted discussion on the merits of the tilt. That the UK is stepping into a militarily congested space is one concern. Some suggest the UK should focus more on the Euro-Atlantic area and worry the armed forces will be stretched too thinly. Others have welcomed the UK's commitment to the region, particularly by those concerned by China's military might.

3.1

A militarily congested space

One major concern is the UK is stepping into a militarily congested space. Countries in South-East Asia are pursuing military modernisation, especially naval and aerial platforms and systems, in part to offset China's military might.³¹

“The Indo-Pacific is the epicentre of rising strategic competition”

Scott Morrison,
Prime Minister of
Australia, June 2020

Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, explained in the journal *Foreign Affairs* that countries in the region will always see China's naval presence as an attempt to advance its territorial and maritime claims.³² Dr Garima Mohan, of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, similarly says the growing economic and military reach of China has precipitated concern and anxiety among South-East Asian and Indian Ocean countries.³³

Discussing the perspective from Japan, Professor Akio Takahara of the University of Tokyo, told the Lords International Relations and Defence Committee that “China's maritime advancement is real, and it poses a direct threat to Japan's territory and our sea lines of communication.”³⁴ The Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command says the military balance in the Indo-Pacific is becoming more “unfavourable for the United States and our allies.” He said the greatest danger the US and allies face in the region is the “erosion of conventional deterrence vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China.”³⁵ The Lords International Relations and Defence Committee is currently considering the [Government's security and trade relationship with China](#).

³¹ “Annual defence report 2020: Asia Pacific”, *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 1 December 2020, “Powering up: Air force modernisation in Southeast Asia”, *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 17 January 2018. The Government's [UK defence and security exports statistics for 2019](#) says the Asia-Pacific region has seen increased defence import activity in recent years, particularly in the aerospace and naval sectors.

³² Lee Hsien Loong, “The endangered Asian century”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020

³³ “[Uncorrected oral evidence: The UK's security and trade relationship with China](#)”, Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, 21 April 2021, Q61

³⁴ “[Uncorrected oral evidence: The UK's security and trade relationship with China](#)”, Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, 21 April 2021, Q61

³⁵ “[Erosion of U.S. Strength in Indo-Pacific Is Dangerous to All, Commander Says](#)”, US Department of Defense, 9 March 2021

Nations in the region are increasing their military spending. India, Japan, South Korea and Australia were the largest military spenders in the Asia Oceania region after China in 2019-2020.³⁶

Australia plans to spend US\$270 billion over the next decade on its military, including on long-range weapons and upgrading bases along its northern shores. Prime Minister Scott Morrison describes the conflation of global, economic and strategic uncertainty currently affecting Australia as the most serious since the collapse of the global and regional order collapsed in the 1930s and 1940s.³⁷

The Australian Prime Minister also warns the risk of miscalculation and even conflict is “heightening” in the region.³⁸ Admiral James Stavridis, a former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, identifies miscalculation, for example between pilots or ship captains of rival nations, as one of the ways in which a potential US-China war at sea could begin.³⁹

3.2 Relationships with allies

Dr Lynn Kuok, of the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), suggests the UK is well placed to work with allies and partners to build capacity in the region. She cites the UK’s historical ties, strong navy, membership of the Five Power Defence Arrangements and [Five Eyes intelligence network](#),⁴⁰ and its ties to Japan. Dr Kuok also suggests the UK’s strong naval capabilities make it well placed to preserve maritime security in the region.⁴¹ Veerle Nouwens, of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), says there is a whole range of activities which the UK could undertake that will add value to the region. These could include training, joint exercises and institution building within security agencies.⁴²

Alexander Downer, a former Australian Foreign Minister, suggests the UK should consider becoming an ASEAN dialogue partner, allowing it to exercise

³⁶ [“World military spending rises to almost \\$2 trillion in 2020”](#), SIPRI, 26 April 2021

³⁷ [Speech by Prime Minister Scott Morrison on the launch of the 2020 defence strategic update](#). Australian Prime Minister website, 1 July 2020

³⁸ [Speech by Prime Minister Scott Morrison on the launch of the 2020 defence strategic update](#). Australian Prime Minister website, 1 July 2020

³⁹ James Stavridis, [“Four ways a China-US war at sea could play out”](#), Asharq al-Awsat, 26 April 2021

⁴⁰ The FPDA consists of UK, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore and New Zealand. The Five Eyes Intelligence network consists of the UK, US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

⁴¹ [“Uncorrected oral evidence: The UK’s security and trade relationship with China”](#), Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, 14 April 2021, q58

⁴² [“Uncorrected oral evidence: The UK’s security and trade relationship with China”](#), Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, 14 April 2021, q58

more credible influence in the region because it will be seen as part of its architecture.⁴³

Euan Graham, of the IISS, suggests some “like-minded” Asia-Pacific countries, notably Australia, Japan and Singapore, are receptive to a European security role in their region. He suggests they view Europe as generally benign and valued as a source of training, doctrine and expeditionary presence. He identifies China and North Korea as the Asian countries most hostile to a European military presence.⁴⁴ In April 2021 the EU adopted a new [strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific](#) with plans for more joint exercises.

India, Japan, Australia and the US form the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as the Quad, which provides a forum for senior officials to discuss regional security issues. Dr Kuok notes these are also the UK’s “natural partners” in the region. Lord Boyce, a former First Sea Lord, suggests the UK should look for ways to create bonds with the Quad.⁴⁵

The UK already has a wide range of existing defence agreements or arrangements with countries in the region.⁴⁶ This includes being one of the signatories to the United Nations Declaration of 27 July 1953 that ended conflict on the Korean peninsula. However, the UK has no treaty obligations to come to the defence of South Korea if it is attacked.⁴⁷

The UK is currently pursuing closer defence relations with India. At a summit in early May 2021 the two countries pledged to develop a “free, open and secure Indo-Pacific region.”⁴⁸ In May 2021 the UK and India agreed a “[2030 Roadmap for a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#)” in which they pledged to deepen their defence and security cooperation through an India-UK Defence and International Security Partnership Agreement. This includes joint exercises, maritime cooperation, industry collaboration on key military technologies including combat aircraft, maritime propulsion system and complex weapons.

AUKUS

On 15 September 2021 Prime Minister Boris Johnson, US President Joseph Biden and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison [issued a joint statement](#)

⁴³ Alexander Downer “[The Integrated Review as strategy](#)”, part of “the Integrated Review in context: A Strategy fit for the 2020s?”, School of Security Studies and Centre for Defence Studies, King’s College London, July 2021

⁴⁴ “Asia-Pacific regional security assessment 2020”, IISS, chapter 9

⁴⁵ [HL Deb 22 April 2021 c811](#)

⁴⁶ A list was given in response to a written question in 2013 but this may not reflect current agreements - [HC Deb 6 June 2013 c1282W](#)

⁴⁷ For more on this see “[UK defence obligations to South Korea](#)”, Commons Library paper, October 2017

⁴⁸ “[2030 Roadmap for a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#)”, Prime Minister’s Office, 4 May 2021

announcing the creation of an “enhanced trilateral security partnership” called AUKUS – Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States.⁴⁹

A major part of the agreement is for the three countries to begin consultations to help Australia acquire nuclear-powered (not armed) submarines.

The statement also announces plans to further “enhance our joint capabilities and interoperability.” These will initially focus on cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and additional undersea capabilities.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson told MPs the partnership demonstrates “Britain’s generational commitment to the security of the Indo-Pacific.” The UK National Security Advisor, Sir Stephen Lovegrove, described the submarine agreement as “perhaps the most significant capability collaboration anywhere in the world in the past six decades.”⁵⁰

Reaction to the announcement – which was unexpected – varied considerably. China accused the three nations of a “Cold War” mentality and had “seriously undermined regional peace and stability, intensified the arms race and undermined international non-proliferation efforts.” Indonesia and Malaysia worried AUKUS could spark an arms race in the region, potentially heightening the risk of conflict and placing Southeast Asia at the frontline of any US-China conflict. Others, such as the Philippines, were more welcoming of what they saw as addressing the military “imbalance” in the region. Library paper [The AUKUS agreement](#) explores further the response to the partnership announcement.

3.3 Should the UK focus on the Euro-Atlantic?

Some have questioned whether the UK should instead remain focused on the Euro-Atlantic region, given the concerns about Russia (described in the review as the “most acute direct threat to the UK”) and concentrate its maritime efforts in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea.

MPs raised this in the [debate on the deployment of the carrier strike group](#) in the Commons on 26 April 2021. Shadow defence secretary John Healey said that while the deployment is proof of the carrier strike group capability “let us not fall for the illusion that Britain is somehow able to project force everywhere in the world at once.”

Healey also suggested that, given the deployment will not significantly alter the balance of military power in the Indo-Pacific region, the UK should better focus its defence efforts “on where the threats are”, namely the Euro-Atlantic “where Russia poses the greatest threats to our vital national security

⁴⁹ [“UK, US and Australia launch new security partnership”](#), Gov.uk, 15 September 2021

⁵⁰ [“Sir Stephen Lovegrove speech at the Council on Geostrategy”](#), Cabinet Office, 16 September 2021

“We should focus defence efforts on where the threats are, not on where the business opportunities might be.”

John Healey,
Shadow Defence
Secretary, April 2021

interest.”⁵¹ The SNP defence spokesman, Stewart Malcolm McDonald, echoed these concerns when he asked for assurances that “we will not be left open closer to home.”⁵²

Lord Richards of Herstmonceux, former Chief of Defence Staff (2010-13), similarly believes the UK should focus “unequivocally” on the Euro-Atlantic area and free up American assets, if necessary, to focus on China “on our collective behalf.”⁵³

Such concerns were repeated by MPs when they responded to the Prime Minister’s oral statement on AUKUS on 16 September 2021. Keir Starmer, the Leader of the Opposition, said: “Whatever the merits of an Indo-Pacific tilt, maintaining security in Europe must remain our primary objective.”⁵⁴ Ian Blackford, the SNP Westminster leader, raised concerns about Russia, saying: “with all the focus of this agreement on the Indo-Pacific, what risks are there that vigilant eyes are taken off the threats closer to home?”⁵⁵

3.4

Risk of overstretch?

Can the armed forces accommodate a new focus on the Indo-Pacific and the ambition of a “persistent presence”, given existing demands? This question is posed by Dr Jack Watling of RUSI, who points out that the new security commitments to allies in the Indo-Pacific outlined in the review are not accompanied by any obvious reduction in those elsewhere.⁵⁶

Tobias Ellwood, Chair of the Defence Select Committee, raised this with the Defence Secretary when he said: “our Royal Navy will soon be too small to meet our growing operational commitments and the increasingly diverse threat picture that we now face”.⁵⁷ The Defence Committee launched an [inquiry into the Royal Navy in April 2021](#).

⁵¹ [HC Deb 26 April 2021 c 71](#)

⁵² [HC Deb 26 April 2021 c 77](#)

⁵³ “[Oral evidence: Defending global Britain in a competitive age](#)”, Defence Committee, HC 1333 2019-21, 23 March 2021

⁵⁴ [HC Deb 16 September 2021 \[AUKUS\]](#).

⁵⁵ [HC Deb 16 September 2021 \[AUKUS\]](#).

⁵⁶ Dr Jack Watling “[The Integrated Review: can the UK avoid being overcommitted?](#)”, RUSI commentary, 19 March 2021

⁵⁷ [HC Deb 26 April 2021 c 71](#)

Annex: Current UK defence presence in Indo-Pacific

Singapore

The UK maintains a permanent presence in Singapore “[as a commitment to the Five Powers Defence Agreement.](#)” This takes the form of a small logistics facility at Sembawang, known as the British Defence Singapore Support Unit. It provides port and fuel facilities for visiting warships (UK and other nations). In 2019 the MOD said it consisted of five military and two civilian personnel, plus 21 locally employed contractors.⁵⁸

The Royal Navy has a long history in Singapore. The Singapore Naval Base was built so that the Royal Navy could dock its large warships in Asia-Pacific. The decision to build the base was made in 1921 and formally opened in 1938. This was reversed during the Healey defence reviews of the mid-1960s, when decisions were taken to reduce the UK’s global footprint and concentrate the deployment of the military more in Europe.

Brunei

The army’s sole presence in the region is in Brunei. As with Singapore, there are historical reasons for this. In 1888 Brunei became a British Protected State. Brunei was the only Malay state in 1963 which chose to remain so rather than join the federation that became Malaysia. The United Kingdom remained responsible for Brunei’s defence and external affairs until the Sultanate’s declaration of independence in 1984.

However, contrary to a commonly held view, the UK has [no obligations to come to Brunei’s defence.](#) The Exchange of Notes attached to the 1979 [Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation](#) states all prior “special treaty relations” between Brunei and the UK were terminated, “including all residual responsibilities of the UK in the event of an external threat to the Kingdom of Brunei”. There is an agreement regarding the continued provision of assistance to the Brunei armed forces by the UK and training facilities in Brunei for the UK armed forces. The arrangement has been periodically renewed since 1962 by a series of agreements, known today as the Brunei Garrison Agreement, the most recent of which [was agreed in 2020.](#)

The British Army in Brunei currently consists of an infantry battalion of the [Royal Gurkha Rifles](#) and an Army Air Corps Flight of Bell 212 helicopters. When the battalion is physically in Brunei, the Sultan of Brunei pays for all salaries and almost all basing costs.⁵⁹

The jungle warfare division run courses for all members of the British Army.

⁵⁸ [PQ227935](#), 7 March 2019

⁵⁹ [HC Deb, 11 October 2010, c97W](#)

Oman

A new permanent Joint Logistics Support Base at Duqm port in Oman opened in 2018. Duqm has a dry dock facility able to accommodate submarines and the Queen Elizabeth II class aircraft carriers.⁶⁰ The Ministry of Defence has said Duqm gives the UK “[a strategically important and permanent maritime base east of Suez, but outside of the Gulf.](#)”

The Persian Gulf

The UK has maintained a permanent maritime presence in the Persian Gulf since 1980. [Operation Kipion](#) combines the Royal Navy’s operations in the Middle East patrolling the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal and counter-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean.

The operation aims to promote peace and stability in the region, and ensure the safe flow of oil and international trade. The UK Naval Support Facility in Bahrain is the main naval facility in the Persian Gulf for UK naval vessels. Four mine-counter measure vessels and one Type 23 frigate are permanently based there. The RAF’s operational headquarters for the Middle East is at Al Udeid air base in Qatar, and can use airbases in Qatar and Oman.

Further reading:

- [Operation Kipion: Royal Navy assets in the Persian Gulf](#), Commons Library paper, January 2020
- [UK forces in the Middle East region](#), Commons Library paper, January 2020

Diego Garcia

Between 1968 and 1973 the British Government cleared the entire Chagos Archipelago of its inhabitants in anticipation of a US military base on the biggest island, Diego Garcia. The Archipelago was made a colony, the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). It subsequently became a British Overseas Territory. The US presence in the British Indian Ocean Territory is governed by a series of international agreements which set out that the whole Territory should be [made available for UK and US defence purposes](#). In November 2016 the decision was made to extend the US military base on Diego Garcia until 2036. The UK has a small military presence on the island to [maintain sovereignty](#), performing customs and policing duties. Further reading: [Disputes over the British Indian Ocean Territory: February 2021 update](#), Commons Library paper.

⁶⁰ [PQ139415](#), 30 April 2018

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