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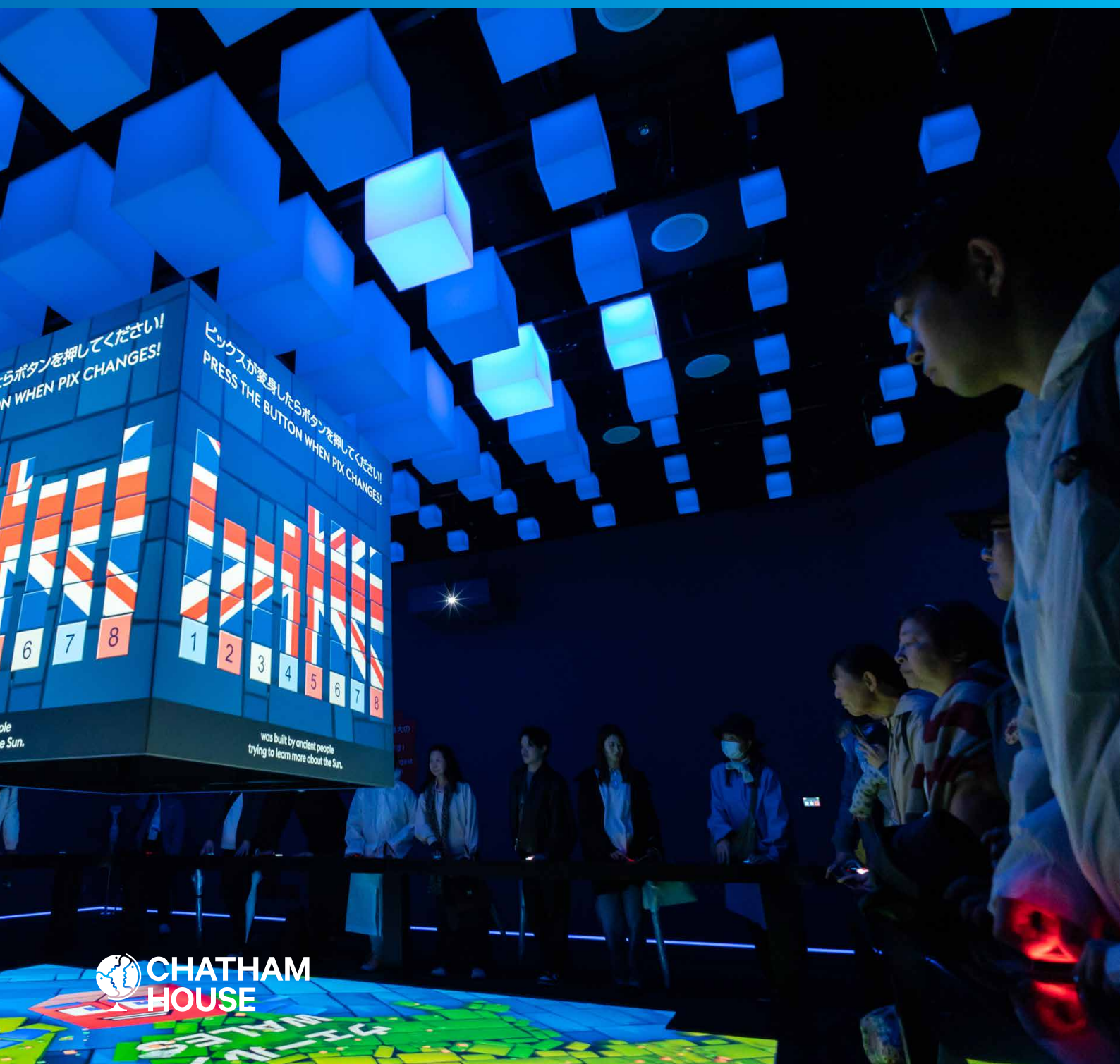
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Why the Indo-Pacific should be a higher priority for the UK

Using Britain's alliances and
networks for greater impact

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Summary

- The early actions of the Trump administration have forced the UK to focus urgently on European defence and security. Yet the Indo-Pacific, as one of the most dynamic and geopolitically contested regions in the world, also deserves to be a key foreign policy priority for the UK government.
- The region is critical for British interests because it encompasses security risks affecting the UK, presents vital long-term economic opportunities, and is vulnerable to climate risks that – if not mitigated – will have a major impact on the world. The Indo-Pacific is also home to several middle powers with shared interests in upholding climate, security and trade norms. The links and alliances between these states will be critical to effective cooperation, particularly given the increased unpredictability around US foreign policy.
- Getting its approach to the Indo-Pacific right will also help the UK to manage the challenges of a more powerful, assertive and globally influential China. Despite limited capacity to shape Beijing's actions directly, the UK can influence the neighbourhood in which China resides by working with partners to establish and enforce shared norms, and to support regional countries' sovereignty and resilience.
- Previous UK governments have aspired to deeper diplomatic and security engagement in the Indo-Pacific, and the current Labour government maintains a broad commitment to this ideal. But while the case for more fully recognizing the importance of the region has been made before, this paper sets out how that focus can be updated, refined, and aligned with the UK's other foreign policy priorities. In a time of straitened government resources and plentiful calls on ministerial attention, it is critical that UK policymakers see the region not in isolation but as a source of partnerships and linkages that can advance wider British interests. The UK should use this 'network power', in cooperation with like-minded governments, to make a decisive impact in the region.
- The paper recommends dividing the UK's Indo-Pacific policy around three broad thematic/geographical groupings, and setting strategic priorities for each:
 - Among the '**Indo-Pacific Four**' – Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea – we suggest that the UK needs to defend key partnerships from a volatile US and build closer ties on trade and economic security. Ensuring the viability of AUKUS – the military procurement and technology-sharing agreement between Australia, the UK and the US – should be one such priority. The UK and the Indo-Pacific Four also need to coordinate their offers of security and development support to other states in the region, to avoid undercutting each other's approaches and to ensure best use of limited resources.
 - **Southeast Asia** presents singular opportunities to expand UK trade and investment, as countries in this subregion collectively represent one of the world's most stable, most cohesive and fastest-growing emerging market blocs. But economic cooperation prospects could be undermined by risks from climate change, rising geopolitical pressures and supply-chain fragmentation. As China seeks to entrench its Indo-Pacific dominance, and

as Southeast Asian governments fret about US trade protectionism, the UK can and should offer more options to Southeast Asian partners in terms of economic and security cooperation.

- In **South Asia**, the UK needs to build on its successful conclusion of a limited trade deal with India to widen the scope of bilateral cooperation in a way that leverages both countries' broader foreign policy priorities (e.g., engagement with the US and the Global South). The UK must also recognize the risks to India's growth and stability from challenges affecting South Asia more generally, such as a lack of trade integration and the potential for crisis and conflict. Two examples of these risks were the ouster in 2024 of the India-friendly government of Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, and the terrorist attack in Kashmir in April 2025 that triggered hostilities between India and Pakistan.
- An effective Indo-Pacific strategy across these three groupings will require more expansive UK cooperation with European allies, which share similar objectives to the UK yet lack the resources to make decisive impacts alone. The UK should build on work done with France and other European allies to coordinate naval visits to the Indo-Pacific, ensuring that support on maritime security is more coherent and that such support complements the offerings of other European partners. In the economic sphere, there is great potential for the UK, EU partners and the Indo-Pacific Four to do more together – whether supporting a rules-based trading system, aligning development assistance at a time of shrinking budgets, or imposing a more coherent structure on the plethora of infrastructure and climate finance initiatives targeted at the region.
- Finally, the UK government needs to build a clearer public and political narrative about why the country has interests in the Indo-Pacific and how it will pursue them. This may help to win over the many officials in the Indo-Pacific who are keen to see Britain do more but are unclear about the UK's intentions and depth of commitment. Compelling communication of the rationale for UK engagement is also necessary domestically to ensure wider buy-in across government, in the UK business community and with the broader public for an ambitious, long-term Indo-Pacific strategy.

Introduction

The early behaviour of the second Trump administration has forced the UK government to focus urgently on European security. The long-signalled possibility that US willingness to underwrite European defence, through solid commitments to NATO and consistent support for Ukraine, might weaken is now becoming an abrupt and painful reality. Crises in the Middle East, meanwhile, are consuming American diplomatic bandwidth and resources. At one level, there is an obvious case for the UK to prioritize Europe in its foreign and security policy.

However, as a prominent middle power with global interests, the UK does not have the luxury of focusing on only one region or problem at a time. The Indo-Pacific remains one of the world's most dynamic and contested geopolitical arenas, and presents significant risks and opportunities for the UK. The case for an Indo-Pacific focus in UK foreign policy has been made before, and recent government strategies – including the 2025 Strategic Defence Review and National Security Strategy – maintain previous commitments to the region.¹ But they do so at a time of considerable calls on the government's resources and attention. The purpose of this paper is to argue how the UK's approach to the Indo-Pacific can be updated, refined and aligned with the current government's other foreign policy priorities. To ensure effective engagement despite limited resources, the UK must have a clear narrative underpinning its work in the region, and must coordinate its efforts more effectively with allies and close partners in both the Indo-Pacific and Europe. Most importantly, UK foreign policy must find a way to bridge both regions, rather than viewing them as competing geopolitical priorities.

The Indo-Pacific remains one of the world's most dynamic and contested geopolitical arenas, and presents significant risks and opportunities for the UK.

This matters, in particular, because the US is shifting away not just from the role it has played in Europe, but from its global role in upholding international institutions and the multilateral agreements and rules broadly known as the post-war international order.² At the same time, China remains willing to threaten global trade routes, freedom of navigation and international law in the Indo-Pacific, and to use its economic dominance to pressure the UK and the UK's allies around the world. Even if the US picks a more conventional president after Donald Trump's term ends

¹ UK Government (2025), 'National Security Strategy 2025: Security for the British People in a Dangerous World', policy paper, 24 June 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-2025-security-for-the-british-people-in-a-dangerous-world>; Ministry of Defence (2025), 'The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad', policy paper, last updated 8 July 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-strategic-defence-review-2025-making-britain-safer-secure-at-home-strong-abroad>; UK Government (2021), 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy', 16 March 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>.
² Momtaz, R. (2025), 'Taking the Pulse: Is the Transatlantic Relationship at a Breaking Point?', Carnegie Europe, 20 February 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2025/02/taking-the-pulse-is-the-transatlantic-relationship-at-a-breaking-point?lang=en>.

in 2029, the US is likely to continue as a much more unilateral and transactional power than it has been in the past, demanding, at best, that its allies do much more for themselves.³

In response to these shifting regional and global dynamics, we argue that the UK should coordinate more intensively with other Indo-Pacific and European middle powers, and organize its strategy around three broad sets of interactions with different countries. The first is coordinating with like-minded US allies, namely Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea. The second, we argue, should involve focusing on economic, climate and security links with Southeast Asian nations. Finally, an effective Indo-Pacific strategy must support regional development and economic integration in South Asia, while broadening the scope of the UK's recently upgraded but still limited bilateral partnership with India.

This paper is based on interviews with dozens of officials and experts working on Indo-Pacific issues in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Seoul, Singapore, Tokyo, Berlin, Brussels and London. We spoke to officials from the following countries and organizations: the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia, the European External Action Service (EEAS), Finland, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, NATO, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, the United Kingdom, the United States and Vietnam. The feedback from these interviews informed our analysis, but the recommendations in this paper are ours alone.

Why is the Indo-Pacific important to the UK?

The Indo-Pacific encompasses the majority of the world's population, and by some estimates will account for over 50 per cent of global growth in the period to 2050.⁴ The region is also the source of numerous shared global climate, trade and security challenges – as well as potentially a source of their solutions. While the exact borders of the region, and preferred labels for it, are subject to much discussion, by the term 'Indo-Pacific' we are referring broadly in this paper to the span of countries between the Indian and Pacific oceans, incorporating South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Pacific countries including Australia, New Zealand and Japan. It should be noted that this regional definition includes China: where we refer to the Indo-Pacific in the widest geographical sense, we understand China to be part of that region; however, the focus of this paper is the UK's policy approach to countries in the region *outside* of China, and how the UK should engage with this 'non-China' subset of Indo-Pacific states.

The Indo-Pacific matters for climate action. The region contains some of the world's most significant carbon emitters – but also the fastest deployers of solar, renewable

³ Daalder, I. H., Grand, C. and Schwarzer, D. (2025), *A New Transatlantic Bargain: The Case for Building a Strong European Pillar*, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 12 February 2025, <https://www.belfercenter.org/transatlantic-bargain>.

⁴ UK Government (2023), 'Global Trade Outlook', Department for Business and Trade, February 2023, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1139093/global-trade-outlook-february-2023.pdf.

and other alternative energy technologies.⁵ While China is critical to this picture, other countries in the region have potentially substantial roles to play too. South Korea, for example, builds civil nuclear power plants more cheaply and efficiently than many other countries.⁶ While the region has contributed less to carbon emissions in historic terms compared with the combined contributions of Europe and the US (though China's cumulative contributions continue to grow),⁷ it will make an outsized impact on emissions if growing economies in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia, do not make a successful transition to greener energy systems; by some projections energy demand in ASEAN will more than double by 2050.⁸ In a world of globalized supply chains, countries like the UK rely on Asian centres of production – UK imports of goods from Asia have steadily risen in the last 20 years.⁹ The vulnerability of these centres of production to rising sea levels and extreme weather is also a source of economic vulnerability for the UK.¹⁰ The UK government has made global climate leadership a foreign policy priority. There is no addressing climate change without addressing climate change in – and in cooperation with – Asia.

The Indo-Pacific is also an unrivalled economic powerhouse, and will contain four of the world's five biggest economies – China, India, Indonesia and Japan – by 2032.¹¹ The UK joined the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a regional trade agreement, in 2024. In so doing, the UK has not only positioned itself to benefit from the region's growth potential; it has also gained a seat at the table in an alternative forum for shaping economic integration and trade rules at a time when global trade institutions are under strain. CPTPP membership alone is unlikely to provide a significant boost to UK gross domestic product (GDP) in the medium term, but it provides the foundations to expand trade and investment.¹²

In security terms, the Indo-Pacific is a crucible of geopolitical risks. It encompasses waterways vital for global commerce, particularly the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and the Strait of Malacca (the corridor between Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia through which trillions of dollars' worth of global trade passes annually).¹³

⁵ Ritchie, H. and Roser, M. (2024), 'CO₂ emissions', Our World in Data, <https://ourworldindata.org/co2-emissions> (accessed 28 May 2025).

⁶ Lovering, J., Yip, A. and Nordhaus, T. (2016), 'Historical construction costs of global nuclear power reactors', *Energy Policy* 91, April 2016, pp. 371–82, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0301421516300106>.

⁷ Evans, S. and Viisaeinen, V. (2024), 'Analysis: China's emissions have now caused more global warming than EU', Carbon Brief, 19 November 2024, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-chinas-emissions-have-now-caused-more-global-warming-than-eu>.

⁸ ASEAN Centre for Energy (2024), 'The 8th ASEAN Energy Outlook', ASEAN Centre for Energy, 26 September 2024, <https://aseanenergy.org/publications/the-8th-asean-energy-outlook>; International Energy Agency (undated), 'How much CO₂ do countries in Asia Pacific emit?', <https://www.iea.org/regions/asia-pacific/emissions> (accessed 15 Jul. 2025).

⁹ Ward, M. (2024), *Geographical pattern of UK trade*, House of Commons Library Research Briefing, 13 December 2024, p.12, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7593/CBP-7593.pdf>.

¹⁰ Hicks, R. (2021), 'Southeast Asia to bear the brunt of worsening global climate, IPCC warns', World Economic Forum, 17 August 2021, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2021/08/southeast-asia-weather-extremes-global-warming-2030-ippc-report>.

¹¹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia) (2017), 'The Indo-Pacific will create opportunity', *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, 7 November 2017, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/minisite/static/4ca0813c-585e-4fe1-86eb-de665e65001a/fpwhitepaper/foreign-policy-white-paper/chapter-two-contested-world/indo-pacific-will-create-opportunity.html>.

¹² Schneider-Petsinger, M. (2023), 'Real value for the UK in joining CPTPP is strategic', Chatham House Expert Comment, 31 March 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/03/real-value-uk-joining-cptpp-strategic>.

¹³ Center for Innovation, Trade and Strategy (2023), 'Geoeconomic Crossroads: The Strait of Malacca's Impact on Regional Trade – Interview with Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit', National Bureau of Asian Research, 5 October 2023, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/geoeconomic-crossroads-the-strait-of-malaccas-impact-on-regional-trade>.

Maritime freedom of navigation through these waterways is increasingly contested, with the South China Sea in particular the site of rising tensions over territorial claims and military build-ups. China's growing use of military threats and 'grey zone' coercion to intimidate Taiwan, a self-governing island that China claims as its territory, is raising the risk of a conflict that could pitch the US and China, two nuclear-armed superpowers, against each other. Grey-zone tactics include military drills and activities intended to intimidate, as well as political interference and sabotage.¹⁴ Meanwhile, North Korea's advancing military ambitions and nuclear programme threaten regional stability, raising concerns about nuclear proliferation and potential escalation. These intertwined security challenges have regional and global implications, already evident in some cases even in Europe. North Korean troops, for example, have been fighting alongside Russian ones against Ukraine, while the expanding China–Russia partnership continues to complicate European options for tackling the Russian military threat. Elsewhere, there remain significant potential flashpoints between China and India, and between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan.

Why is the UK important to the region?

The UK shares common challenges with many Indo-Pacific nations, particularly in navigating the economic and regulatory influences of the US, the European Union (EU) and China. Regional diplomats and partners view the UK as a practical and straightforward actor, not seeking to impose conditions on engagement in the way the superpowers often do. Indo-Pacific states recognize the UK's strengths, including its advanced defence industry, high-tech military and open, globally connected economy. But they remain sceptical of its long-term commitment to the region.¹⁵ And while justifiably urgent British priorities – particularly shoring up Europe's defences – will remain critical, we argue that the UK is capable of maximizing trade, diplomatic and security ties in the Indo-Pacific at the same time.

Some promising steps have been taken. The Labour government has picked up the mantle of its Conservative predecessors' foreign policy 'tilt' to the Indo-Pacific, largely jettisoning the reservations expressed in some Labour figures' pre-election criticism of UK engagement in the region. Through both previous and current governments, the UK – as well as becoming a member of the CPTPP – has become a dialogue partner to ASEAN, the key regional organization in Southeast Asia. The UK has also expanded ties with Japan and South Korea, including through a Reciprocal Access Agreement with the former.¹⁶ And the UK remains a member of the AUKUS partnership on nuclear-powered submarines and technological cooperation with Australia and the US. This network of overlapping relationships, initiatives and organizations – combined

¹⁴ Shetler-Jones, P. (2025), 'Taiwan's Evolving Response to China's Grey Zone Actions', RUSI, 31 March 2025, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/policy-briefs/taiwans-evolving-response-chinas-grey-zone-actions>.

¹⁵ Interviews with Indo-Pacific and UK partner diplomats, 2024 and 2025.

¹⁶ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (2023), 'UK/Japan: Agreement concerning the Facilitation of Reciprocal Access and Cooperation between the Self-Defense Forces of Japan and the Armed Forces of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland [TS No.38/2023]', international treaty, 9 November 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukjapan-agreement-concerning-the-facilitation-of-reciprocal-access-and-cooperation-between-the-self-defense-forces-of-japan-and-the-armed-forces-of--2>.

with the UK's reputation as a mostly reliable, pragmatic nation – leaves the country well placed to become a powerful regional influencer in the Indo-Pacific, in cooperation with its key partners.

What can the UK do?

The UK's initial strategic 'tilt' to the Indo-Pacific was announced and pursued at a time when the nation was riven over its referendum decision to exit the EU. The concept was often interpreted in public policy debates as an ambition to 'replace' the UK's relationship with the EU, including by rethinking Britain's military links, security priorities and economic ties.¹⁷ This has never been a realistic proposition. But it would also be a mistake to view focusing on the Euro-Atlantic or Indo-Pacific as a binary choice. The two regions' security, diplomatic and economic issues are deeply interconnected. Evolving geopolitical dynamics – such as growing China–Russia ties – and the globalized nature of manufacturing and supply chains mean the idea of a world divided into isolated theatres does not hold. The risk is of UK policymakers assuming that measures introduced to date as part of the 'tilt' constitute a finalized and fully formed Indo-Pacific strategy, rather than the preliminary foundations of a multi-dimensional, longer-term approach that will require further development. One example of a category error of this kind is seeking to be involved in regional groupings or agreements such as ASEAN or the CPTPP without the necessary sense in government of how the UK's presence can be influential, or how UK diplomats can be used to best effect.

While not a decisive force balancer, the UK brings a unique offering as a security partner because of its potential, as the possessor of one of the world's few high-tech militaries, to help regional allies build up their own capabilities.

The 'tilt' has also often been debated in terms of the UK's military presence or contribution in the Indo-Pacific. Unavoidably, the UK's defence priority must be addressing the most immediate, proximate threat: Russian aggression in Europe. Doing so will require rebuilding UK forces so that they can better mitigate the risks from Russia and counter Russian capabilities. This will mean significant investment in upgrading the UK's relatively depleted military, and in boosting Britain's capacity to meet its commitments to NATO. Yet despite the heavy resource commitment this implies, the UK can still play an important security role in the Indo-Pacific. While not a decisive force balancer, the UK brings a unique offering as a security partner because of its potential, as the possessor of one of the world's few high-tech militaries, to help regional allies build up their own capabilities.

¹⁷ UK Government (2021), 'UK applies to join huge Pacific free trade area CPTPP', press release, 30 January 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-applies-to-join-huge-pacific-free-trade-area-cptpp>.

The UK could also do more to coordinate with European partners on Indo-Pacific issues, for example by amplifying any European military presence in the region. Several European states face similar dilemmas to those of the UK in terms of prioritizing foreign policy commitments and the optimum deployment of military assets: these states share similar interests in maintaining a predictable and secure Indo-Pacific, yet – also like the UK – lack the resources individually to devote sufficient attention to the region while dealing with urgent security challenges closer to home (for example, Russia's war on Ukraine). The UK could work with like-minded European states to ensure that offers to Indo-Pacific states on building military, security or coastguard capacity are complementary – rather than consisting of disconnected projects generated by each government. The UK could also seek to help Europe present a united front on the shaping and enforcing of norms around trade and digital governance, and could collaborate with European partners on supplying development investment to Indo-Pacific recipients so that the consolidated impact of aid budgets is maximized despite reduced funding in many donor states.

Finally, the UK needs a strong Indo-Pacific strategy to buttress its China strategy, and vice versa. While the UK has limited capacity to shape China's actions directly, it can influence the broader regional environment in which China operates. By offering viable alternative cooperation arrangements, and by working with other (i.e. non China Indo-Pacific) governments in the region to shape and enforce norms around trade and governance, the UK can, in effect, give such states the option of having more partners than just their dominant neighbour.

In that spirit, this paper offers suggestions for a refreshed UK approach to the wider region outside of China. It is intended as a complement to a separate recent Chatham House paper: *What the UK must get right in its China strategy: Resilience, flexibility and autonomy as core principles for engagement*, by William Matthews.¹⁸ We do not set out here an exhaustive list of everything the UK should attempt across this vast, diverse expanse of the world. Instead, we will suggest some priorities and a framework for thinking strategically about the Indo-Pacific. We will also outline how the UK can better 'join the dots' across its bilateral relationships, its interactions with relevant international organizations, and its involvement in other initiatives affecting (or focused on) the Indo-Pacific.

Priorities for expanding UK influence in the Indo-Pacific

1. Pursue integrated cooperation with the 'Indo-Pacific Four': Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea

Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea are the Indo-Pacific nations most aligned with UK interests and values across the security, economic and political realms. These four countries are fellow democracies and middle powers. Like the

¹⁸ Matthews, W. (2025), *What the UK must get right in its China strategy: Resilience, flexibility and autonomy as core principles for engagement*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136475>.

UK, they have advanced technological capabilities and are committed to maintaining open international trade and a functioning multilateral system. As NATO's designated partners in the Indo-Pacific, they are known as the 'Indo-Pacific Four' and are lynchpins of the US alliance system in the region.

However, with the US set to maintain an 'America First' course for at least the duration of the Trump presidency and potentially beyond, US allies that want a functioning global order will need to intensify their joint efforts to uphold and refresh the institutions and principles that are under assault. One of the problems with this is that Indo-Pacific structures and institutions for addressing common problems are nascent or limited. Moreover, where the US has alliances in the region, these tend to be more bilateral than multilateral.

As the US calls for allies around the world to take more responsibility for their own security (a message that predated and will outlast the Trump presidency),¹⁹ the UK needs to bolster its own direct ties with Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea; it also needs to make more expansive use of and, where necessary, reinforce regional networks involving these four countries.

Responding to a more assertive China is a part of this picture. China has ratcheted up its pressure on US Indo-Pacific allies over recent years, targeting Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea through economic coercion, cyberattacks, interference in democratic processes and, in some cases, direct military intimidation.²⁰ But while all four countries have been considering some degree of 'de-risking' from Beijing – in the sense of reducing their economic exposure to China – all four accept that China will remain one of their most important trade and investment partners for years to come. The UK should invest more in convening discussions among these allies about how to navigate and shape a world in which China is ever more powerful and assertive internationally, and in which (from US allies' perspectives) the US is a less reliable partner. Discussions could usefully include sharing experiences in dealing with both China and the US, and assessing how the Communist Party of China (CPC) might behave in Europe or elsewhere as it seeks to exert influence more widely.

The UK and, in varying permutations, members of the Indo-Pacific Four sit together in an overlapping series of established and emerging international organizations and cooperation initiatives. For example, all five countries are dialogue partners of ASEAN. Australia, Japan, South Korea and the UK are G20 members. South Korea has considered applying to join the other four countries in the CPTPP.²¹ On the security front, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea are deepening their cooperation with NATO, after their leaders participated in a NATO summit for the

¹⁹ France 24 (2016), 'Obama calls on complacent Europe to raise defence spending', 25 April 2016, <https://www.france24.com/en/20160425-obama-calls-complacent-europe-raise-defence-spending>; Deutsche Welle (2025), 'Trump call to up defense spending to 5% rattles NATO allies', 8 January 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/trump-call-to-up-defense-spending-to-5-rattles-nato-allies/a-71249209>; and Daalder, Grand and Schwarzer (2025), *A New Transatlantic Bargain*.

²⁰ Adachi, A., Brown, A. and Zenglein, M. J. (2023), 'Fasten your seatbelts: How to manage China's economic coercion', MERICS, 7 December 2023, <https://merics.org/en/report/fasten-your-seatbelts-how-manage-chinas-economic-coercion>; Council on Foreign Relations (undated), 'China's Maritime Disputes', <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/chinas-maritime-disputes> (accessed 24 May 2025).

²¹ Koo, M. G. (2025), 'Navigating Shifting Tides: South Korea and Northeast Asian Trade Integration', *Asia Policy*, 20.1, 30 January 2025, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/navigating-shifting-tides-south-korea-and-northeast-asian-trade-integration>.

first time in 2022.²² Australia and New Zealand are part of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing and security partnership with the UK, the US and Canada. There have been talks about Japan, New Zealand and South Korea cooperating with Australia, the UK and the US on the development of advanced military technologies under Pillar Two of the AUKUS agreement (the first pillar of which will see Australia develop nuclear-powered submarines with British and US support).²³ Japan and the UK are also working with Italy to develop a next-generation fighter aircraft under the Global Combat Air Programme.

The UK should work with the Indo-Pacific Four to develop a broader shared strategic agenda on regional and global issues, particularly in relation to security and trade.

Rather than launch new initiatives or formal agreements, the UK should use these existing platforms to expand the range and depth of its cooperation on a case-by-case basis. At the same time, the UK should work with the Indo-Pacific Four to develop a broader shared strategic agenda on regional and global issues, particularly in relation to security and trade. One option would be to set up a 'Quintet' meeting between ministers or senior officials from the UK and the Indo-Pacific Four. This should happen outside of NATO to ensure a wider agenda beyond defence alone, with one possibility being on the sidelines of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, where all five countries are present as dialogue partners. This would build on a growing number of strategic conversations among the Indo-Pacific Four. In 2024, the UK and Japan agreed to establish a regular '2+2' meeting of economic ministers, while the UK and South Korea have also recently set up a '2+2' meeting of foreign and defence ministers.²⁴ But while the establishment of these forums should be welcomed, the challenge, as one senior Japanese official put it, will be 'how to develop a meaningful agenda with enough concrete outcomes that we can sustain these meetings'.²⁵

For such discussions to prove useful and enduring, top-down political will and bottom-up energy and material progress are needed. With a high turnover of governing parties or leaders in all five democracies, it is dangerous to rely on leader-to-leader contact to drive long-term relationships. The UK has deep and trusted relationships with Australia and New Zealand, but even with these partners

²² NATO (2025), 'Relations with partners in the Indo-Pacific region', last updated 23 June 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_183254.htm (accessed 9 Jul. 2025).

²³ UK Government (2024), 'AUKUS partnership to consult with other nations, including Japan, on military capability collaboration', press release, 20 April 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/aukus-partnership-to-consult-with-other-nations-including-japan-on-military-capability-collaboration>; Seok, S. H. (2024), 'Expanding AUKUS Pillar 2: An Inclusive Indo-Pacific Alliance Structure', RUSI Commentary, 16 July 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/expanding-aukus-pillar-2-inclusive-indo-pacific-alliance-structure>.

²⁴ UK Government (2024), 'PM meeting with Prime Minister Ishiba of Japan: 18 November 2024', press release, 18 November 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-meeting-with-prime-minister-ishiba-of-japan-18-november-2024>; UK Government (2023), 'The Downing Street Accord: A United Kingdom-Republic of Korea Global Strategic Partnership', press release, 22 November 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-downing-street-accord-a-united-kingdom-republic-of-korea-global-strategic-partnership>.

²⁵ Interview with official, Tokyo, November 2024.

some joint projects need defending and shoring up. In particular there is AUKUS, intended to deliver nuclear-powered submarines for Australia and the UK by the 2040s. The first phase of the project is for the US to sell Australia three to five Virginia-class submarines by the early 2030s, before the three countries then develop new vessels for future deployment.²⁶ However, with submarine procurement for the US's own use running behind targets, there are concerns the project could falter at this first hurdle. People in President Trump's entourage have also sent mixed signals about the resolve of the US government to maintain the programme – a review of US involvement was launched in June 2025.²⁷ For the UK, AUKUS is expected to deliver jobs and a new submarine capability. Indeed, the government's recent Strategic Defence Review signalled an intention to accelerate production of the planned submarines.²⁸ But the UK also needs a political strategy both for maintaining AUKUS's momentum at home and for continuing to champion Britain's role in the programme as strategically advantageous to the US and Australia.²⁹

The appointment of a government special representative for AUKUS is a good start, but clearer progress and milestones are required. The latter are needed to ensure adequate funding and clarity of purpose for Pillar Two of the programme, under which the three countries intend to share and jointly develop cutting-edge technologies. Since the deal's launch in 2021, some progress has been made on identifying priorities for Pillar Two, including on quantum technology, undersea warfare systems and hypersonic weapons technology, but dedicated official capacity, funding and links to wider research priorities have been lacking; all are needed to maintain progress.³⁰

At the same time, the UK has made headway in deepening its partnerships with Japan and South Korea, which lack the linguistic, historic and cultural links that underpin the UK's relationships with Australia and New Zealand. The enhanced bilateral partnerships agreed by the previous British government with Japan and South Korea respectively in 2023 laid out solid foundations and high ambitions.³¹ But officials and political leaders will need to work hard to build trust and develop the 'muscle memory', so to speak, of cooperation given that both Japan and South Korea have very different bureaucratic and political cultures from the UK. The UK government can accelerate this mutual familiarization process through meetings of senior officials and ministers on the sidelines of the many forums where all five countries are present. The UK should also consider trilateral dialogue with Japan and South Korea, which have in recent years boosted their own bilateral cooperation with each other despite the historical grievances that still linger between them. Both nations are

²⁶ O'Rourke, R. (2025), 'Navy Virginia-Class Submarine Program and AUKUS Submarine (Pillar 1) Project: Background and Issues for Congress', Congressional Research Service, 28 March 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL32418>.

²⁷ Doherty, B. (2025), 'Australia should persist with Aukus despite risk of US relationship 'becoming unstuck', former defence department secretary says', *Guardian*, 31 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/31/dennis-richardson-australia-aukus-submarine-deal-us-former-defence-chief>; and Detsch, J. and McCleary, P. (2025), 'Pentagon to review US role in AUKUS submarine pact', *Politico*, 11 June 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/06/11/pentagon-aukus-review-australia-britain-00401332>.

²⁸ Ministry of Defence (2025), 'The Strategic Defence Review 2025'.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Lee, P. K. and Nason, A. (2022), '365 days of AUKUS: Progress, challenges and prospects', United States Studies Centre, 14 September 2022, <https://www.ussc.edu.au/365-days-of-aukus-progress-challenges-and-prospects>.

³¹ UK Government (2023), 'The Hiroshima Accord: An enhanced UK-Japan global strategic partnership', 18 May 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-hiroshima-accord>; UK Government (2023), 'The Downing Street Accord'.

exposed by recent shifts in policy and rhetoric from the US, having built early-stage partnerships and developed shared goals with the Biden administration, particularly on economic security and supply-chain resilience.³²

2. Focus on trade, climate and maritime security in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is one of the world's most dynamic and cohesive emerging-market regions, and the UK has an opportunity to develop long-term partnerships there that support stability, resilience and economic prosperity. Together, the 10 member states of ASEAN are home to more than 670 million inhabitants and constitute the world's fifth biggest economy.³³ Southeast Asia's geographical location, adjacent to China and spanning busy global shipping routes, also places the region at the heart of global supply chains for everything from apparel to electronics to semiconductors. At the same time, Southeast Asia is a crucible of competition between the US and China, and the centre of escalating disputes about territorial claims in the South China Sea. The region is also highly exposed to the risks associated with possible conflict over Taiwan, given that hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians live and work on the island.³⁴

Although ASEAN has been criticized for its internal divisions and failure to take a united stance against assertive Chinese actions, it remains one of the world's most effective regional bodies. In some respects ASEAN is the anchor for Asia's broader economic, diplomatic and security architecture. It convenes Asia's major diplomatic and security forums, including the leader-level East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus and the ASEAN Regional Forum. It also serves as the foundation for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the world's largest free-trade agreement, which connects ASEAN economies with Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea.

Britain's interactions with ASEAN are set to become more important in the coming years. The organization had long maintained a moratorium on admitting new dialogue partners, but in 2021 it accepted the UK as such a partner³⁵ – a sign, perhaps, that Southeast Asian governments see Britain as a valuable collaborator and want it to play a bigger role in the region. Yet many remain sceptical about the UK's long-term commitment to Southeast Asia, having seen interest from Western governments – including the UK, the US and Australia – rise and fall over the decades.³⁶ As US foreign policy becomes more unpredictable under Trump, the UK has an opportunity to show that it can be relied upon.

³² Keeler, T. J., Parry, J. L. and Zhang, J. (2023), 'US, Japan, South Korea promise to improve supply chain monitoring at Camp David summit', Mayer Brown, 28 September 2023, <https://www.mayerbrown.com/en/insights/publications/2023/09/us-japan-south-korea-promise-to-improve-supply-chain-monitoring-at-camp-david-summit>.

³³ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (2024), 'UK-ASEAN factsheet', policy paper, 26 July 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-asean-association-of-southeast-asian-nations-factsheet>.

³⁴ Government Portal of the Republic of China (Taiwan) (undated), 'People', https://www.taiwan.gov.tw/content_2.php (accessed 16 Jul. 2025).

³⁵ UK Government (2025), 'UK-ASEAN factsheet', updated 11 July 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-asean-association-of-southeast-asian-nations-factsheet/uk-asean-association-of-southeast-asian-nations-factsheet--2>.

³⁶ Lin, J. (2024), 'Does ASEAN Still Matter to the Labour Government in the United Kingdom?', Fulcrum, 18 July 2024, <https://fulcrum.sg/aseanfocus/does-asean-still-matter-to-the-labour-government-in-the-united-kingdom>.

But the UK needs to intensify its commitments in a nimble way that makes best use of constrained resources and reflects the realities and limitations of ASEAN as an organization. UK ministers must show up at relevant annual ASEAN meetings; they will also need to understand that the organization moves at a slow, bureaucratic pace, and that it makes lowest-common-denominator decisions based on consensus. Yet while duly respecting the symbolism of engaging with ASEAN, the UK also has room to develop its diplomacy creatively through bilateral and minilateral relationships. Traditionally, the UK has looked at Southeast Asia through the lens of Britain's former colonies or protectorates in the region: Brunei, Malaysia, Myanmar and Singapore (although Myanmar's deeply troubled domestic politics and its ongoing civil wars have limited scope for substantial UK engagement). Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore remain members of the Commonwealth. Malaysia and Singapore, alongside Australia and New Zealand, are part of the Five Power Defence Arrangements, agreed in 1971 to promote defence cooperation and joint exercises between these Commonwealth members and the UK. The UK's deepening ASEAN partnership and accession to the CPTPP also offer a potentially strong platform for expanding relationships and developing new economic opportunities in Southeast Asia. Four Southeast Asian nations – Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam – are members of the CPTPP, and Indonesia has applied to join too.

The UK needs to intensify its commitments in a nimble way that makes best use of constrained resources and reflects the realities and limitations of ASEAN as an organization.

The UK should also focus on expanding its economic and security cooperation with Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. All are experiencing rapid GDP growth and face increasing challenges from China's assertive behaviour. In contrast to the UK's relationships with ASEAN's Commonwealth members, its relationships with these three large emerging nations are relatively underdeveloped across trade, investment and security. This means there is a significant potential upside to deepening ties. But the UK will need to invest more time and resources in unlocking the opportunities available, because conducting business and diplomacy can be challenging in all three nations. Indonesia and the Philippines are sprawling archipelagic democracies with high degrees of decentralization, boisterous politics and protectionist economic tendencies. Vietnam is much more open to external trade and investment, but it is also a one-party Communist state that lacks transparency and has a poor human rights record. Moreover, its rigid system of party control can make security cooperation difficult. Acknowledging and understanding these challenges will be the key to overcoming them. At the same time, the value of wider trade agreements such as the CPTPP will only be realized if the UK works with British businesses to support their links to the region and help them take advantage of the potential benefits of a closer relationship.³⁷

³⁷ International Trade Committee (2023), 'CPTPP: opportunities and challenges for the UK', House of Commons, 25 April 2023, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmintrade/13/report.html#heading-1>.

Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam are also essential to the global fight against climate change, which this British government and its predecessors have rightly made a priority. All three emerging nations have rapidly increasing levels of greenhouse gas emissions. Their major cities, manufacturing areas and food production zones are all dangerously exposed to sea-level rises and unpredictable weather. But the countries also have the potential to shift quickly towards renewable energy. The UK has already made positive initial steps on this front, backing Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs) with Vietnam and Indonesia; these partnerships are designed to crowd in investment and support developing countries in shifting from fossil fuels to clean energy.³⁸ As the UK is a centre both of global finance and of expertise on climate change and the energy transition, there is scope for the UK government, British businesses and other UK climate actors to be involved in a much wider range of activities – whether directly in Southeast Asian countries or in support of related initiatives in the region. Given that the UK's international development budget has been cut, however, the government will need to work more closely with businesses, investors, and the academic and scientific communities to find areas where it can use its limited funding as a catalyst for the activities of others.

On international development more generally, the significant aid cuts and erratic trade policy of the US have jeopardized the US's foreign policy credibility, and have provided a relative boost to China's reputation as an economic and development partner.³⁹ In this context, the UK's own aid budget cuts seem ill conceived, as they leave a significant gap in development support that middle powers and smaller countries in the region will look to China (and others) to fill; this may entrench China's position as a regional patron.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, despite the UK's reduced resources, there are some actions which the British government can usefully take. These include helping to coordinate the urgent tasks of both simplifying the global development system and of prioritizing how best to spend shrinking financial resources within it.⁴¹ Initial suggestions that the UK will seek to convene a discussion in 2025 on 'the future of aid' are promising.⁴² Without a considered approach, the risk is that UK cuts in aid will lead to a diluted response across multiple priorities, not only in Southeast Asia but elsewhere too. Reducing the amounts the UK spends from its aid budget on providing accommodation in the UK for refugees and asylum-seekers would help to free up more funds for overseas support. With less to spend, the UK will need to cooperate more closely with its European allies and the

³⁸ Ayas, C., Khuat, T. A., Giwangkara, J. and Nguyen, T. (2025), 'Progress on just energy transitions in Vietnam and Indonesia', Climateworks Centre, 7 May 2025, <https://www.climateworkscentre.org/resource/progress-on-just-energy-transitions-in-vietnam-and-indonesia>.

³⁹ Bland, B. (2025), 'Trump's tariffs will push Southeast Asia uncomfortably close to China', Chatham House Expert Comment, 8 April 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/04/trumps-tariffs-will-push-southeast-asia-uncomfortably-close-china>; and Rising, D. and Ghosal, A. (2025), 'USAID cuts jeopardize Agent Orange cleanup and other efforts critical to ties with Vietnam', AP News, 3 April 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/usaids-cuts-trump-agent-orange-vietnam-bien-hoa-2d55174970ef36c3247f6981150913de>.

⁴⁰ Loft, P., Brien, P. and Barber, S. (2025), 'UK aid: Reducing spending to 0.3% of GNI by 2027/28', House of Commons Library, 17 April 2025, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10243>; and Conley Tyler, M. and Trinh, V. D. (2025), 'As Western aid dries up, Southeast Asia faces the fallout', East Asia Forum, 1 April 2025, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/04/01/as-western-aid-dries-up-southeast-asia-faces-the-fallout>.

⁴¹ Cichoka, B. and Gavas, M. (2025), 'Development Agencies Must Clarify Their Roles to Work Better Together. Here Are Three Ways to Start', Center for Global Development, 18 June 2025, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/development-agencies-must-clarify-their-roles-work-better-together-here-are-three-ways-start>.

⁴² Wintour, P. (2025), 'Conversation on future of aid long overdue: UK looks to lead response to swingeing US cuts', *Guardian*, 7 May 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/may/07/conversation-on-future-of-aid-long-overdue-uk-looks-to-lead-response-to-swinging-us-cuts>.

Indo-Pacific Four, while focusing on the priorities most valued by Southeast Asia's increasingly middle-income countries; these priorities include mobilizing investment for development, job creation and the climate transition.

The UK has solid business and trade foundations in Southeast Asia, but the government needs to do more to expand these relationships. On the economic front, British companies such as BP, HSBC and Prudential are already major investors in the region. But there are many more opportunities to be tapped, given the right promotional effort and support from the government. British International Investment, the UK's development finance institution, should continue to expand its work in Southeast Asia, where it can deliver social impact for regional partners while helping to catalyse private sector opportunities.⁴³ Conversely, fast-growing Southeast Asian companies are increasingly looking for external investment opportunities in more advanced economies. The UK can capitalize on this shift, at a time when many other nations are closing their doors to foreign investment.

Fast-growing Southeast Asian companies are increasingly looking for external investment opportunities in more advanced economies. The UK can capitalize on this shift, at a time when many other nations are closing their doors to foreign investment.

When it comes to security, the UK can learn much about the challenges of confronting China from its Southeast Asian partners, who are on the front line in terms of resisting Beijing's efforts to assert regional dominance. While the British military is already thinly stretched, the UK can do much more to help Southeast Asian nations become more resilient. This could include expanding strategic dialogues with key partners, and increasing cooperation in areas such as military education, maritime law and maritime domain awareness.

The UK is an important external security partner for the region. A permanent UK military base in Brunei is home to a battalion of the Royal Gurkha Rifles. Two British offshore patrol vessels are permanently deployed to the Indo-Pacific. Security-related UK activities in the region also include regular Royal Navy ship visits, extensive defence diplomacy with Southeast Asian governments, and cooperation on military training. Beyond specifically military aspects, Southeast Asian governments are keen to intensify their security cooperation with the UK because of its high-technology defence industrial base, its global diplomatic heft, its reputation for excellence in intelligence, and its broad expertise and influence in the maritime sector (spanning the shipping industry, insurance and international law).

The UK has already applied to join the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus, two key annual security summits. While it should continue to pursue these bids, it should also explore more informal and flexible

⁴³ British International Investment (2025), 'British International Investment commits \$95 million to accelerate energy transition in South-East Asia', 22 January 2025, <https://www.bii.co.uk/en/news-insight/news/british-international-investment-commits-95-million-to-accelerate-energy-transition-in-south-east-asia>.

engagement. The action plan agreed between the UK and ASEAN for 2022–26 covers nearly every possible area of cooperation.⁴⁴ In the next iteration, currently being negotiated, the UK needs to narrow its focus to the most productive areas of overlapping national interests with Southeast Asian states. It will take time and diplomatic effort to zero in on these areas. The UK will need to listen more carefully to regional partners, who sometimes privately accuse their British counterparts of seeking to impose an external agenda without paying sufficient heed to Southeast Asian perspectives.⁴⁵ The UK should also work behind the scenes with the Indo-Pacific Four and European partners to deconflict and deduplicate cooperation initiatives in Southeast Asia, where diplomats often complain that they are invited to clashing workshops on similar issues by different external partners. And, to signal its commitment to the region, the UK government should accelerate plans to reopen an embassy in Timor-Leste, which is set to become the 11th member of ASEAN in October 2025.⁴⁶

3. Prioritize regional integration and stability in South Asia, not just the UK–India relationship

South Asia is the world's fastest-growing region economically and accounts for almost a quarter of the world's population – more than a third of whom are below the age of 18.⁴⁷ However, when it comes to integration between states, South Asia stands in stark contrast to Southeast Asia. South Asia is the most poorly integrated region in the world: both economically, with only 5 per cent of total trade being intra-regional trade;⁴⁸ and institutionally, with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the regional organization, not having held a summit since 2014. While the UK is not in a position to impose greater integration on South Asian states, it can help to devise solutions to regional problems: for example, by convening meetings on shared issues of concern such as climate risk and climate change mitigation, or by fostering infrastructure connectivity through institutions such as the Commonwealth.

In recent years, the UK – alongside the US and other US allies – has intensified its relationships with India. This increased engagement in part reflects the somewhat inaccurate perception of India as a geopolitical balancing force against Beijing, and as a potential alternative economic partner at a time when Chinese growth is slowing and China is becoming less open to foreign investment.⁴⁹ While this renewed focus on India is long overdue, it is partly driven by irrational exuberance. India, for its part, has always been clear that it is pursuing its own interests

⁴⁴ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (2022), 'Plan of action to implement the ASEAN–United Kingdom Dialogue Partnership (2022 to 2026)', 4 August 2022, <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>.

⁴⁵ Interviews with regional officials, 2024 and 2025.

⁴⁶ Tatoli (2025), 'UK expresses willingness to open its embassy in Timor-Leste', 24 January 2025, <https://en.tatoli.tl/2025/01/24/uk-expresses-willingness-to-open-its-embassy-in-timor-leste/15>.

⁴⁷ Kirby, P. (2024), 'Rising Tide, Hidden Rocks: South Asia's outlook in five charts', World Bank Blogs, 22 October 2024, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/endpovertyinsouthasia/rising-tide--hidden-rocks--south-asia-s-outlook-in-five-charts>; UNICEF (2018), 'Children in South Asia: The Situation for Children in South Asia', March 2018, <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/children-south-asia>.

⁴⁸ World Bank (undated), 'Why #OneSouthAsia?', <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/south-asia-regional-integration/trade>.

⁴⁹ Bajpae, C. and Yu, J. (2025), 'How the China–India relationship intersects with the West', in *How China–India relations will shape Asia and the global order*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136444>.

on a case-by-case basis, rather than adopting a pro-Western agenda. Evidence of this includes India's deep and enduring partnership with Russia, a partnership embedded in New Delhi's long-standing tradition of strategic autonomy in foreign policy. British policymakers need to take a more clear-headed view of the opportunities and risks of engaging with India if the UK is to ensure a successful long-term partnership. The UK also needs to frame its relationship with India in the broader South Asian context, rather than seeing India as a standalone power.

At present, the government's overall approach to South Asia is disjointed, with different departments engaging various parts of the region. For example, organizational structures in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) have tended to group teams and leads focused on Afghanistan and Pakistan in different directorates from those focused on India and the Indian Ocean region. Developing a more cohesive approach to South Asia in Whitehall would help the UK more effectively address the serious security and economic challenges in countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. At the same time, a more unified strategy and more integrated internal institutional structure for South Asia could help UK policymakers to make more of the opportunities India presents, while mitigating risks in the bilateral relationship.

The announcement in May 2025 of the UK's conclusion of a free-trade agreement with India complements efforts to build out the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that was agreed with New Delhi in 2021.⁵⁰ But given India's protectionist instincts, any final deal is unlikely to be transformative for the bilateral economic relationship. That is why it is important that the UK government supports other channels that can expand trade and investment linkages, such as the Technology Security Initiative that was launched in 2024.⁵¹ More broadly, gambling on India's economy to rise more or less on its own – in the absence of similar progress in neighbouring economies – would be a poor bet. Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are all in the midst of International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailouts; these four countries' domestic political travails, and their tensions with New Delhi, present major risks to South Asian stability. The stakes have been underlined by the renewal of hostilities between India and Pakistan in April and May 2025,⁵² and by the downturn in relations between India and Bangladesh following Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's removal in August 2024; the latter development has undermined regional connectivity initiatives.⁵³

The UK can – and must – work more closely with India and its South Asian neighbours, finding ways to better facilitate cooperation with regional and extra-regional partners.

⁵⁰ Department for Business and Trade (2025), 'UK-India trade deal: conclusion summary', 15 May 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-india-trade-deal-conclusion-summary/uk-india-trade-deal-conclusion-summary>.

⁵¹ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (2024), 'UK-India Technology Security Initiative factsheet', 25 July 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-india-technology-security-initiative-factsheet/uk-india-technology-security-initiative-factsheet>.

⁵² Bajpae, C. (2025), 'Modi's deadly bombing strike on Pakistan goes to the heart of India's great dilemma', *Guardian*, 7 May 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/07/india-pakistan-kashmir-missile-strikes-modi>.

⁵³ Kumar, M. and Paul, R. (2025), 'India withdraws transshipment facility for Bangladesh exports via land borders', *Reuters*, 9 April 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-withdraws-transshipment-facility-bangladesh-exports-via-land-borders-2025-04-09>.

Reflecting India's preference for informal, minilateral groupings, the UK should strengthen trilateral engagement with India and third powers such as the US, Australia or France. Areas of potential cooperation include technology (exploring synergies between the India–UK Technology Security Initiative, the India–US Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (renamed the TRUST Initiative by the Trump administration) and the EU–India Trade and Technology Council); energy (such as India's push to develop small modular nuclear reactors, which has been accelerated by the push to revise the country's nuclear liability legislation); and security (particularly in the Indian Ocean region). Such efforts could eventually link up with existing regional initiatives such as the Quad, which comprises Australia, India, Japan and the US.

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South Asia is also an area in which British, but particularly US, aid cuts will bite. Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan are the largest recipients of US foreign assistance in South and Central Asia.⁵⁴ These are also the most vulnerable countries in that region, as evidenced by the fact that most US aid to South and Central Asia has been used for humanitarian, health and economic development purposes. In relation to South Asia itself, any UK prioritization and coordination with remaining donors should focus on maintaining multilateral support for work on urgent humanitarian and refugee crises. A prime example is the Rohingya refugee crisis, for which Bangladesh continues to bear significant response costs despite itself having been rocked by political turmoil.⁵⁵ Another area of UK focus should be on cultivating joint efforts to build climate resilience. South Asia is among the most vulnerable regions to climate shock events – as illustrated by the devastating impact of floods that struck Pakistan in 2022.⁵⁶

The British government should also work with India across other parts of the Global South, prioritizing policy areas and geographies where the two countries have overlapping interests and can offer complementary capabilities. India's ambition to be a leading voice of the Global South should be leveraged as New Delhi seeks to offer a more benign worldview that is non-Western but not explicitly anti-Western. Areas of cooperation could include digital public infrastructure,

⁵⁴ Farivar, M. (2025), 'How pause in US foreign aid is impacting South, Central Asia', Voice of America, 11 February 2025, <https://www.voanews.com/a/how-pause-in-us-foreign-aid-is-impacting-south-central-asia/7971248.html>.

⁵⁵ Bajpae, C. and Schröder, P. (2024), 'Sheikh Hasina's departure exposes the fractures in Bangladesh's politics', Chatham House Expert Comment, 7 August 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/08/sheikh-hasinas-departure-exposes-fractures-bangladeshs-politics>.

⁵⁶ Lang, M., Rexer, J., Sharma, S. and Triyana, M. (eds) (2025), *From Risk to Resilience: Helping People and Firms Adapt in South Asia*, Washington, DC: World Bank Group, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/publication/from-risk-to-resilience-helping-people-and-firms-adapt-in-south-asia>.

education, climate finance and health, with the UK potentially able to both offer financing solutions and use forums such as the Commonwealth to support Indian initiatives, particularly in South Asia.⁵⁷

4. Intensify cooperation with European partners in the Indo-Pacific

European states have increasingly built ties in the Indo-Pacific. Engagement has been driven by economic interests and by security concerns over China's rising assertiveness. France, as a resident power in the region due to its overseas territories, was among the first European nations to adopt an Indo-Pacific strategy, set out in 2018; it later updated this strategy in subsequent policy documents.⁵⁸ Germany released its own Indo-Pacific guidelines in 2020; these emphasized the need to diversify economic partnerships and reinforce rules-based regional security.⁵⁹ The EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, released in 2021, highlighted the need for economic, security and digital cooperation with regional partners.⁶⁰ Additionally, the Netherlands, Italy and other European states have outlined their own approaches to the Indo-Pacific, often aligning with broader EU strategies. Most of these documents contain common themes and aspirations shared with the UK. In particular, such strategies display a desire by European states to moderate the effects of great power competition in the Indo-Pacific, and to provide alternatives to cooperation with China by presenting themselves as the partners of choice on trade, security and development. All European partners – as well as Indo-Pacific allies – have limited resources in this regard, but many have shared goals. Better coordination could be achieved not necessarily by announcing new joint projects or committees, but by picking specific areas on which to work more closely on existing plans and ensuring that these are meaningful to partners. For example, in recent years states and entities including the EU and the Quad governments have sought to offer training and technology to partners in the region to help patrol and detect vessels off their coasts.⁶¹ But these offers can overlap, some are still nascent, and some partners in the region report that adopting and implementing them successfully remains challenging – coordinating efforts could prevent such problems, and would be more productive than launching new initiatives.⁶²

⁵⁷ Fitzwilliam, H. (2024), 'The Commonwealth must reform to seize its moment', *The World Today*, 2 February 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2024-02/commonwealth-must-reform-seize-its-moment>.

⁵⁸ Abensour, M. (2025), 'The Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific: France's strategy', Groupe d'études géopolitiques, February 2025, <https://geopolitique.eu/en/2025/02/27/the-geopolitics-of-the-indo-pacific-frances-strategy>; Bachelier, J. and Pajon, C. (2023), *France in the Indo-Pacific: The Need for a Pragmatic Strategic Posture*, Focus stratégique, No. 117, Ifri, October 2023, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/ifri_bachelier-pajon_france_in_the_indo-pacific_oct2023.pdf.

⁵⁹ Federal Foreign Office (2021), 'One year of the German Government policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region: Taking stock', 13 September 2021, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/asien/indo-pazifik-leitlinien-fortschritt-2481700>.

⁶⁰ European External Action Service (2024), 'EU Indo-Pacific Strategy', 6 November 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eu-indo-pacific-strategy-topic_en.

⁶¹ European Commission (undated), 'CRIMARIO – Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific', https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/projects/crimario-critical-maritime-routes-indo-pacific_en; Roy, A. (2023), 'PacNet #48 – A work in progress: The Indo-Pacific partnership for maritime domain awareness', Pacific Forum, 23 June 2023, <https://pacforum.org/publications/pacnet-48-a-work-in-progress-the-indo-pacific-partnership-for-maritime-domain-awareness>.

⁶² Parameswaran, P. (2025), 'Southeast Asia Maritime Security and Indo-Pacific Strategic Competition', Wilson Center, 13 March 2025, <https://plasticpipeline.wilsoncenter.org/article/southeast-asia-maritime-security-and-indo-pacific-strategic-competition>.

This is particularly the case when it comes to security. The UK has increased its deployment of military assets in the Indo-Pacific. The UK's Carrier Strike Group was deployed to the region in 2021, and is being deployed there again in 2025.⁶³ In 2021, the UK government also announced it would permanently station two naval vessels in the Indo-Pacific.⁶⁴ France, meanwhile, has long maintained a military presence in its Indo-Pacific territories, while Germany and the Netherlands have sent naval assets to the region in recent years.⁶⁵ Given this substantial aggregate commitment, there is a case to be made for coordinated European naval deployments, joint exercises and intelligence-sharing to strengthen deterrence against coercive actions – for example, by China – in the South China Sea and beyond. Some moves along these lines have already occurred. In 2023 the French president, Emmanuel Macron, and the then UK prime minister, Rishi Sunak, agreed to coordinate aircraft carrier visits to the region.⁶⁶ There is also the possibility of the UK working more closely with the EU's Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) initiative, which aims to enhance European naval activity in key sea lanes.⁶⁷

Governance is another area in which cooperation between the UK and Europe could hold promise. Both the UK and EU states are concerned about China's influence on various norms across the region – from technological standards, via China's export of low-cost digital infrastructure, to its approach to security and trade norms.⁶⁸ With straitened budgets and urgent security priorities in their own immediate region, the EU and the UK could do more to consolidate their work to support open trade, economic development and predictable security in the Indo-Pacific. This could include collaborating to uphold or reform international institutions that are under significant pressure, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and World Health Organization. To offset the withdrawal of some US support for these institutions, a 'coalition of the willing' in Europe and the Indo-Pacific may need to take up the slack; in relation to trade, one possibility would be to refocus existing efforts by building a shared consensus on the purpose of the WTO and on the benefits of predictable trade.

⁶³ UK Government (2025), 'Boost to UK defence and trade as Carrier Strike Group arrives in the Indo-Pacific', press release, 17 June 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/boost-to-uk-defence-and-trade-as-carrier-strike-group-arrives-in-the-indo-pacific>.

⁶⁴ Al Jazeera (2021), 'UK to permanently deploy two warships in Asia Pacific', 21 July 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/21/uk-to-permanently-deploy-two-warships-in-asia-pacific>.

⁶⁵ Bundeswehr (2024), 'German Navy begins Indo-Pacific Deployment 2024', 8 May 2024, <https://www.bundeswehr.de/en/organization/navy/news/german-navy-begins-indo-pacific-deployment-2024-5782518>; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (2024), 'Why is a Dutch navy ship travelling the world over?', 27 June 2024, <https://www.government.nl/latest/weblogs/the-work-of-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs/2024/navy-ship-tromp>.

⁶⁶ Forces News (2023), 'HMS Queen Elizabeth to form backbone of Indo-Pacific security in co-operation with France', 10 March 2023, <https://www.forcesnews.com/services/navy/security-europe-intertwined-peace-indo-pacific-says-sunak>.

⁶⁷ European External Action Service (2024), 'Coordinated Maritime Presences', 21 February 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/coordinated-maritime-presences_en; Weber, G. (2022), 'Maritime security: a window of opportunity for UK-EU cooperation?', UK in a Changing Europe, 11 November 2022, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/maritime-security-a-window-of-opportunity-for-uk-eu-cooperation>.

⁶⁸ Erie, M. S. and Streinz, T. (2022), 'The Beijing Effect: China's "Digital Silk Road" as Transnational Data Governance', *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*, 54(1), pp. 1–92, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3810256; and Chimits, F. (2024), 'EU: De-risking from China hits the road', MERICS, 1 July 2024, <https://merics.org/en/eu-de-risking-china-hits-road>.

As the only European participant in the CPTPP (whose constituent economies account for around 15 per cent of the global economy), the UK should facilitate more cooperation between CPTPP members and the EU.⁶⁹ At a time of rising protectionism, the EU and the states that make up the CPTPP all aspire to support open global trade, pursue further economic integration, and agree rules on everything from digital commerce to state capitalism. In recent calls with the prime ministers of New Zealand and Singapore (both CPTPP members), Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, said she was eager to explore 'closer cooperation' with the CPTPP.⁷⁰ While the EU is highly unlikely to ever join a pre-existing trade agreement, the British government can be an important interlocutor in helping the EU and CPTPP members find areas of meaningful convergence and collaboration.

The UK and European allies could also work more closely with Australia, Japan and South Korea to monitor supply chains and diversify sources of critical goods and materials such as semiconductors and rare earths, thus helping to reduce reliance on China. Partners could also share lessons on common approaches to monitoring and restricting foreign investment in sensitive sectors, in order to prevent economic coercion and technology theft; this is an issue on which all of these countries have recently tightened their legal measures and reinforced policy tools. Finally, with aid budgets having been cut across many European countries, and the shuttering of USAID and major US aid cuts reducing overall aid funding worldwide, there is a strong case for European countries including the UK to cooperate on amplifying shared approaches to development and climate action; such an approach could have stronger effects than working separately with diminished budgets. Joint action should include refreshing the approach of the EU's Global Gateway development programme, an initiative intended to respond to China's Belt and Road Initiative but which – despite a number of flagship projects and interventions – has been criticized for a lack of transparency, coherence or clear assessment of impact.⁷¹ Coordinating engagement via regular dialogues between senior officials, and potentially setting shared priorities as part of the broader EU–UK reset, would help to lay the foundations for these joint efforts. Recent agreements between the UK and France and the UK and Germany respectively to intensify Indo-Pacific cooperation are a positive political signal. But there is much to be done to put these agreements into effect.⁷²

5. Make a strong public case for Indo-Pacific engagement

At home, the UK government needs to make a stronger case to parliament, the business community and the public that the Indo-Pacific should remain an enduring priority in British foreign policy. This does not mean a shift from the security and defence focus on Europe, but a clearer sense of why the Indo-Pacific is vital for

⁶⁹ UK Government (2024), 'UK counting down to CPTPP entry into force', 5 December 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-counting-down-to-cptpp-entry-into-force>.

⁷⁰ Lanktree, G. and Weizman, J. (2025), 'Trump's trade war pushes EU toward Pacific free traders', Politico, 11 May 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-trade-war-eu-pacific-free-traders>.

⁷¹ European Commission (undated), 'Global Gateway', https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en (accessed 28 May 2025); Gavvas, M. and Granito, L. (2024), 'What the Global Gateway Flagship Projects Tell Us about the EU's Priorities', Center for Global Development, 18 December 2024, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/what-global-gateway-flagship-projects-tell-us-about-eus-priorities>.

⁷² Prime Minister's Office (2025), 'UK-France Leaders Declaration', press release, 10 July 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-france-leaders-declaration>; British Embassy Berlin (2025), 'Friendship and Bilateral Cooperation Treaty: The 17 Projects the UK and Germany will deliver together', 17 July 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/friendship-and-bilateral-cooperation-treaty-the-17-projects-the-uk-and-germany-will-deliver-together>.

national interests such as accelerating economic growth, maintaining global freedom of navigation, supporting a free and open trading system, and tackling climate change. While recent strategic documents, including the previous Conservative government's Integrated Review Refresh⁷³ and the current government's 2025 National Security Strategy,⁷⁴ acknowledge the region's economic and geopolitical significance, the argument for sustained, proportionate engagement needs to be more clearly and compellingly made by the Labour government. This should include presenting the case that increased Indo-Pacific engagement provides an opportunity to work with European allies to consolidate shared ties and amplify the advancement of common interests, and offering reassurance that such a shift would not involve replacing one regional focus with another.

Critically, the Indo-Pacific should also be recognized as a pillar of the UK's global climate leadership. UK climate diplomacy often concentrates on the need to engage with China, given the latter's position as the world's largest emitter. But other regional powers – India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, South Korea and Vietnam – are also significant regional carbon emitters and crucial players in tackling climate change.⁷⁵ Supporting Indo-Pacific countries' transitions to clean energy, fostering green finance and bolstering climate resilience in the region should be priorities for the UK. This should include ensuring that early progress on securing partnerships to wind down coal-fired power production in Indonesia and Vietnam does not stall, and that various climate finance initiatives remain on track.

A wider public narrative in the UK also matters. The Labour government has rightly identified that while ordinary voters may not pinpoint foreign affairs as their top concern, the public nonetheless cares about security and desires the UK to be insulated from intensifying geopolitical risks and shocks.⁷⁶ The government should frame cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners as a key plank in this undertaking, as well as part of a broader mission to uphold order, global rules and predictability in an uncertain world.

The UK is home to one of the most globally connected capital cities, a major financial centre, and world-leading media, research and education institutions. For these reasons, Indo-Pacific government members and elites want to come to the UK – and to visit London in particular. Among the many external partners seeking influence and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific, this gives the UK an advantage. When asked what his country wants from the UK, one senior diplomat from a large Asian nation replied: 'We want to learn from your science and technology and to work with you to shape the global narrative about our country.'⁷⁷

However, Asian diplomats, particular those from developing countries, routinely complain in private that their leaders do not get the level of political and diplomatic

⁷³ Cabinet Office (2023), 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world', policy paper, 16 May 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world>.

⁷⁴ UK Government (2025), 'National Security Strategy 2025'.

⁷⁵ International Energy Agency (undated), 'Asia Pacific – Emissions', <https://www.iea.org/regions/asia-pacific/emissions> (accessed 28 May 2025).

⁷⁶ Aspinall, E. and Keogh, E. (2024), *UK Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and Global Affairs: Annual Survey – 2024*, British Foreign Policy Group, September 2024, <https://bfpgrp.co.uk/2024/09/2024-annual-survey-of-uk-public-opinion-on-foreign-policy>; and Williams, J. (2023), *From Security Comes Hope: Politics in the Age of Insecurity*, Labour Together, October 2023, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/64f707cf512076037f612f60/t/6521813ee210ad4464901b0d/1696694740846/From+Security+Comes+Hope+_+LT.pdf.

⁷⁷ Interview with Asian diplomat, February 2025.

access that they feel they deserve, or that they would be offered in Beijing.⁷⁸ By working harder to make regional partners feel welcomed and respected in the UK, the government can improve its relations in the Indo-Pacific and make a clearer case to the British public about the importance of the region. Doing so will require more collaboration across the UK government and with the private sector and civil society. An effective and enduring approach to the Indo-Pacific must begin at home, while also leveraging the UK's strong presence in the region and the power and depth of its global partnerships with like-minded middle powers.

Summary of recommendations

In light of the arguments and policy suggestions presented above, the authors reiterate that an effective 'refresh' of the UK's Indo-Pacific strategy will require the UK government and other relevant stakeholders to take the following steps:

Defend and deepen links with the Indo-Pacific Four

- Defend and ensure political momentum for existing partnerships, including AUKUS.
- Deepen technology, intelligence and defence cooperation with the Indo-Pacific Four, either through Pillar Two of AUKUS or through other partnerships. Focus on addressing gaps in capabilities left by the US, and on sharing strategies for countering and managing Chinese influence. Coordinate offers to other countries in the region.
- Strengthen and deepen ties with Japan and South Korea beyond senior-level interactions, including potentially via cooperation on economic security and other shared concerns.
- Establish a 'Quintet' meeting between ministers or senior officials from the UK and the Indo-Pacific Four to discuss issues of shared strategic concern, including defence, technology, economic security, trade and investment, and the implications of US–China competition.

Harness economic opportunity, bolster climate efforts and support maritime security in Southeast Asia

- Develop informal mechanisms for engagement, rather than solely relying on a push to join formal structures such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting or the ASEAN Regional Forum.
- Refocus efforts to address climate risks in the most vulnerable Southeast Asian countries, in particular working with such countries to ensure existing initiatives generate sufficient investment and do not stall.
- Take a long-term approach to maximizing regional trade links, including relationships associated with the CPTPP. Harness economic links with fast-growing partners such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Ensure that British businesses better understand the opportunities in these markets.

⁷⁸ Interviews with Asian diplomats, 2024 and 2025.

Support deeper regional integration in South Asia, in addition to cultivating UK–India ties

- Continue to develop the critical political and economic relationship with India, while prioritizing wider regional integration and growth rather than just bilateral UK–India ties.
- Expand the UK's links with India beyond the recently completed (and long-awaited) trade deal. Pursue trilateral cooperation involving the UK, India and third-country partners such as France, Australia or the US.
- Work with European partners to fill the most urgent gaps in aid spending left by US funding cuts – with a particular focus on funding to address humanitarian crises (such as the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh) and support health and climate resilience initiatives.

Intensify cooperation with European partners in the Indo-Pacific

- Establish regular dialogue on the Indo-Pacific with senior European officials. Promote wider track 2.0 and track 1.5 dialogues with European counterparts to explore a refreshed approach to the Indo-Pacific. Potentially, focus on coordinating European states' military presences and security support in the Indo-Pacific, including via the EU's Coordinated Maritime Presences. Use the nascent EU–UK reset as an opportunity to do this.
- Work with the Indo-Pacific Four – namely Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea – as well as European countries to coordinate offers of security and development assistance to partners and smaller states. Focus, in particular, on issues where similar initiatives potentially overlap, such as on offers to build security capacity and technology. Take a coordinated approach to addressing common priorities on open trade, stability and support for the climate transition.

Refine how the UK works on and communicates its approach to the Indo-Pacific

- Develop a clearer public case for why the UK needs to engage in the Indo-Pacific, with a focus on maintaining stability, predictability and open trade in the region.
- Ensure that, in addition to the minister for the Indo-Pacific, a senior leader within the FCDO is responsible for championing the region within the department, across the UK government, and with broader British stakeholders and foreign partners.
- Establish a working group on Indo-Pacific impact, bringing together UK and Indo-Pacific government officials, business executives, academics, think-tank researchers and journalists. Use the working group to generate ideas, explore synergies and raise ambition for enhanced Indo-Pacific engagement.
- Make more use of London as an unrivalled global base for convening, and carve out more time to receive leaders from the region at the appropriate level.

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