

Agora policy paper
Keeping up with
ASEAN:
the UK's role in the
Indo-Pacific

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Executive summary

The UK faces significant opportunities and challenges in the Indo-Pacific. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is at the height of its geopolitical importance, but this potential belies a fragile and uncertain region. It is imperative for the UK and ASEAN to come together on areas where both can benefit and to manage expectations on the limits and freedoms of both.

This policy paper attempts to map out the present areas of cooperation between ASEAN and UK on a variety of aspects including international cooperation, economic prosperity, and regional security. It focuses on the UK's presence in the Indo-Pacific region, specifically in the context of its post-Brexit engagement as an entity separate from the European Union. The paper argues that ASEAN stands to benefit from the UK's 'tilt to the Indo-Pacific', referenced in recent official documents such as the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. In the context of an ever-evolving region, the briefing will develop added areas of cooperation to undertake in the coming years.

Now operating as a separate political entity from the EU, the UK will require additional legwork in its engagement with ASEAN. Firstly, the UK must focus on being a force multiplier of international law and norms. Secondly, the UK must deepen economic ties with ASEAN – whether with the group as a whole or with its individual member states – and maximise the momentum towards post-pandemic recovery. Thirdly, the UK must strengthen and bolster security linkages in the region and be ambitious in its role as a strategic actor in the region. The Indo-Pacific region houses a variety of security partnerships and alliances that has helped maintain the peace and security in the region, despite traversing a tumultuous period.

The UK must build upon its previous engagement with the region to develop an independent Indo-Pacific policy centred around ASEAN and aiming to establish itself as a reliable and ambitious security partner.

Introduction

As an entity now separate from the European Union, the UK is again free to pursue and rebuild its previous engagements with ASEAN. Aiming to establish itself as a reliable and ambitious security partner within the Indo-Pacific region. The UK's 'tilt to the Indo-Pacific' is a response to the developing prosperity and security, and changing dynamics in an increasingly important region in world politics and economy.

ASEAN stands to benefit from the UK's increasing presence economically, politically, and in maritime security.

While this new burgeoning partnership between the UK and ASEAN may provide new opportunities in developing and further stabilising the region, the UK faces a tremendous challenge in developing previous and creating new arrangements that will maximise its role within the Indo-Pacific region.

A region of potential and uncertainties

The ASEAN region is at the height of its geopolitical importance. More than US\$3tn in trade passes through the region's largest body of water, the South China Sea, annually[1]. Enormous economic input and output enters and exits the region respectively through the Straits of Malacca and Singapore, both equally important and strategic shipping lanes considered to be among the busiest in the world [2]. Asia prides itself on its powerhouse logistics activity, where demand is spiking as the world enters the post-pandemic new normal [3]. Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam are the top logistics contenders [4]. The Asia-Pacific's e-commerce logistics market size (57.3%) is the world's largest, outpacing other regions combined [5].

This potential, however, is fragile and replete with uncertainties. High levels of economic activity often beget poor environmental sustainability and lead to supply chain disruptions due to natural phenomena. It is therefore no coincidence that Asia's big market potential and growth is, and is expected to be, the hardest hit by climate change [6]. Asia-Pacific has the highest share of natural disasters (at 39.4%) in the last two decades. Of this, South-East Asia has been the most badly hit [7].

ASEAN's economic momentum faced significant setbacks due to the pandemic, slowing down performance especially in the tourism and service sectors [8]. While recovery is indeed in the making, the road there is expected to be long [9].

Geopolitical developments also risk weighing ASEAN down. The region houses a long-running strategic rivalry between China and the United States, flaring up since 2009 following Washington's 'pivot' to Asia [10]. The competition has only intensified since then and ASEAN countries are caught in the mire [11]. Some states, including the Philippines, have pursued a more balanced strategy that taps into both the economic benefits of a well-rounded relationship with Beijing and the buffers of a strategic partnership with Washington [12]. Potential flashpoints up north, including North Korea's missiles testing, pose major risks for ASEAN stability [13]; cross-straits crisis between China and Taiwan risks disrupting global supply chain connections to North-East Asia [14]; more recently, the invasion of Ukraine has affected ASEAN's outlook towards Russia, a neighbour to the north [15].

ASEAN also faces many challenges within the region. The debilitating aggressions in the South China Sea have stalled peace and stability in the region [16]. China's activities in the contested waters have undermined several countries' sovereignties in the region [17]. The pandemic has slowed down progress on this front, affecting even the dialogue and negotiations on the Code of Conduct, a quintessential and binding arrangement essential in keeping the peace in the region [18]. The military junta-led coup of Burma's democratically elected government also tested ASEAN's integrity to the seams. One year on, peace remains elusive, and civilian casualties from targeted protests continue to climb [19, 20]. The efforts in this regard require international stakeholders to facilitate the peaceful transfer of power.

As complex as uncertainties and risks are, ASEAN has made its language clear on developing a collaborative spirit among members and towards external parties. Many in the region have remained steadfast on ASEAN-led mechanisms. The body has released the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific to reinforce dialogue and cooperation over rivalry, to pursue development and prosperity for all, and to seek maritime security that benefits all [21].

The UK as an important partner to ASEAN

The UK's more independent post-Brexit international presence fits with ASEAN's long-standing belief in multilateralism and ASEAN centrality [22]. ASEAN is generally open to new powers in the region so long as ASEAN centrality is upheld, and the UK has affirmed this central tenet countless times [23, 24]. The strong institutional linkages between the UK and ASEAN member states could further cement this principle within bilateral relationships.

On top of the well-established political relations between the UK and ASEAN member states, the budding relations with the organisation as a whole have flourished [25]. Institutional linkages are slowly built from the ground up at

the summit level. The UK's National Crime Agency gained Dialogue Partner status of the ASEAN Chiefs of National Police (ASEANAPOL) in September 2019 [26]. Two months later, the UK Mission to ASEAN was established, charting Downing Street's post-Brexit engagement with Southeast Asia [27]. Then UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab held a meeting with ASEAN foreign ministers in September 2020, the first, and a follow-up meeting ensued in April 2021 [28]. These critical meetings discussed COVID-19 response and aid, economic recovery, and climate change. The UK was conferred ASEAN Dialogue Partner on August 2021, paving the way for deeper and meaningful ways for cooperation [29]. This culminated in the September 2021 Joint Ministerial Declaration on Future Economic Cooperation between ASEAN and the UK, as the world slowly entered the post-pandemic scenario [30]. The first formal meeting between the economic ministers of the UK and ASEAN signals a deference to multilateralism, fair trade, and a recognition of ASEAN's Economic Blueprint 2025.

Despite these encouraging developments, much work needs to be done to strengthen UK-ASEAN relations. In a survey on ASEAN views, about 0.8% believed the UK to hold political and strategic influence [31]. The UK and ASEAN can work on a number of issues including pandemic recovery, strengthening supply chains and open market, international standards for regulatory frameworks, digital innovation, sustainable growth. The remainder of this paper will focus on the opportunities for both to cooperate on strengthening international laws and norms, economic exchanges, and security in the region.

The UK as a defender of international law and norms

An average of 3.4% of survey respondents in ASEAN believe that the UK can step up, provide leadership, maintain the rules-based international order, and uphold international law – a slight uptick from 2.8% in 2021 [32]. Although this figure is at present small, the UK has the potential to become an engaged and reliable partner for ASEAN to reinforce international law and norms in the region. The strong commitment to the rules-based international order is core to the post-Brexit British foreign policy [33].

The UK and ASEAN can work together on maritime security. Britain is signatory of countless international treaties that ASEAN too upholds in its own backyard, especially the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS). The British Government argues UNCLOS to be “a critical part of the rules-based international system” and is committed to upholding the law [34]. The Royal Navy has exercised the right of free navigation overseas in the past, notable ones including HMS Albion's visit to Vietnam in September 2018 and, more recently, HMS Elizabeth's (and the rest of the Strike Carrier Group) long deployment in the South China Sea in October 2021 [35]. Both have stirred China [36]. The UK's

foreign policy position on the South China Sea was made clear by a Note Verbale, co-released with France and Germany in September 2020, rejecting China's illegal maritime claims [37]. This affirms and supplements ASEAN's moves into maritime security together with other dialogue partners like the EU, the US, Japan, and South Korea.

The UK is also a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), limiting arms use of nuclear technology and promoting its peaceful use. The NPT is an irreplaceable foundation of the international system [38]. However, the UK's shift in nuclear policy in the Indo-Pacific raises doubts on its NPT commitment [39]. Although a relatively welcomed development, ASEAN remains cautious of the advent of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) Trilateral Security Partnership [40]. It is important to bring ASEAN back to the core of the discussion and define the many ways in which new and profound initiatives such as the AUKUS brings a more secure and stable Indo-Pacific [41]. On top of this, Britain and her allies must be steadfast in allaying fears of a potential arms race in the region [42].

Another issue of great concern to ASEAN is the February 2021 coup in Burma [43]. The military overthrew the democratically elected government of Burma, resulting in a profound existential crisis for ASEAN [44]. Since then, the organisation has adopted a five-point Consensus returning political normalcy in the country [45]. One year on, however, the military remains reluctant to undergo a political transition, with no concrete improvements to the situation [46]. The international attention and support on the matter has been unfortunately lacking, further threatening Burmese citizens with poverty and regime oppression [47].

As a democracy, the UK must step up in assisting ASEAN into pressuring the Tatmadaw – Burma's military – to adhere to the five-point Consensus along with its other Dialogue Partners [48]. Burma is the story of a long democratic project in the making. It would be remiss for the UK as a Dialogue Partner, also as a democracy, not to step up and assist ASEAN.

The economic potential of UK-ASEAN relations

Whilst Brexit modified the framework of UK-ASEAN trade, trade between the two partners is flourishing. In 2020, UK-ASEAN trade in goods registered a valuation of US\$31bn – a promising start [49].

The UK has well-established ties with ASEAN and has made it among its top priorities for its post-Brexit trade deals [50]. ASEAN and the UK hold economic potential for one another. Firstly, the UK can access ASEAN markets via Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership

(CPTPP) [51]. CPTPP countries represent 13% of the global gross domestic product. More than 8% of UK's exports (services and goods) and almost 7% of imports are with CPTPP member states [52]. The UK Government's negotiations with the CPTPP commission are set to conclude towards the end of 2022, more than a year after its formal request to join the free trade group [53]. The UK's eventual accession into CPTPP can not only strengthen domestic goals but also strengthen supply chain linkages abroad [54].

Second, ASEAN can access the British market with relative ease through negotiated schemes of preference. The UK has the potential to champion the global trade agenda in Asia, and to lead regional initiatives for maturing market interaction [55, 56].

One good example is the Philippines. The UK successfully convened its first Economic Dialogue with the Philippines in 2019. This milestone sets the tone for deeper cooperation, which has become critical in recent years due to the pandemic [57]. Philippine exports continue to enjoy tariff-free entrance to the market thanks to the UK Generalised Scheme of Preference (enhanced framework) [58]. The UK had also invited the Philippines to join the CPTPP [59].

The UK's growing security engagement in the region

The UK forms part of the Philippines' complex web of alliances and partnerships. The Philippines has sought to bolster security ties with partners such as the US – Manila's oldest ally – and regional partners, such as Australia. The UK's post-Brexit engagement in the Indo-Pacific thus not only enhances its regional presence, but presents an opportunity for the country to bolster linkages with other partners with similar values to defend in the region [60].

It is important for security initiatives to continuously affirm and strictly adhere to ASEAN centrality [61]. The UK can make good on its promising start by upholding this as it develops its role in AUKUS. Despite the persisting qualms on AUKUS, 36.4% of ASEAN citizens polled still believe AUKUS will help balance China's growing military power [62]. More than 40% however believe otherwise citing the new partnership could either escalate regional arms race (22.5%) or weaken ASEAN centrality (18%). The UK, alongside Australia and the US, bears the responsibility of ensuring the trilateral partnership does not devolve into full-blown arms escalation in the region.

The UK is also perceived as a potential partner for ASEAN outside of AUKUS. The UK trails fourth in ASEAN's list of strategic options, behind the European Union, Japan, and Australia [63]. The UK can make good of its strong international reputation and standing by pursuing, first and foremost, its norm protection security agenda in Asia. The UK can also bolster bilateral relations

with ASEAN member states on the side which can help close gaps between the two.

Conclusion

Countries must effectively adapt to the circumstances of the times. The UK is ASEAN's potential partner-in-the-making. Freshly out of the EU, the UK's post-Brexit foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific will definitely require work. The British, however, will not be starting from scratch. UK-ASEAN relations have been growing and London has strategically expressed its interests to deepen ties with ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific.

This brief has outlined areas that should become the major focus as the UK deepens ties with ASEAN. First, the UK must be a force multiplier of international law and norms. Second, the UK must develop a two-sided beneficial economic engagement with the region. Lastly, the UK must position itself as a strategic actor in the region. London must prepare for all eventualities that will likely resist this development and must, above all, pursue all possible means that will strengthen and bolster existing linkages. This will ensure the UK remains a valuable partner to ASEAN, as it undeniably is currently.

Policy proposals

- The UK government should further enhance and develop institutional linkages beyond their political relations with ASEAN, pursuing other aspects such as digital innovation among other things
- The UK government should step up and assist ASEAN into pressuring Burma's military junta to adhere to the five-point Consensus along with its other Dialogue Partners
- The UK and ASEAN should develop an enhanced economic regional framework between the two countries to reduce trade barriers and tariffs, among other issues
- The UK should work to establish a security dialogue within the AUKUS alliance that affirms and adheres to ASEAN centrality

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