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UK–ASEAN Relations and the Balance of Power in South-East Asia

Laura Southgate

The UK has adopted a ‘Global Britain’ foreign policy strategy since the 2016 Brexit referendum. This policy seeks to maintain the UK’s standing internationally while strengthening existing global relations. UK relations with Southeast Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) form an important component of this new policy. Laura Southgate examines this new impetus to strengthen UK–ASEAN relations following a period of benign neglect towards the region in the immediate post-Cold War period. In particular, she focuses on the potential success of UK strategy as regards to ASEAN, in light of its extended absence from the region and ASEAN’s growing status as a regional and international power.

This article examines the achievements made in deepening engagement between the UK and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) since the publication of the UK’s Integrated Review in 2021.¹ It assesses the obstacles that are impeding greater cooperation, and argues that the UK has achieved significant success in enhancing UK–ASEAN relations by adopting a position of trusted extra-regional power in Southeast Asia. In a 2021 ‘State of Southeast Asia’ survey canvassing the opinions of ASEAN policymakers, academics, researchers, businesses and civil society activists, the UK came in sixth as most ‘preferred and trusted strategic partner’ for ASEAN to hedge against the uncertainties of the US–China strategic rivalry.² The UK also replaced New Zealand and Russia as preferred strategic partner for Southeast Asia in the event of US unreliability.³ In 2022, the UK strengthened its position as preferred strategic partner, overtaking South Korea and India to claim fourth place.⁴ The

UK also ranked joint sixth as ‘the most influential economic power in Southeast Asia’⁵ and joint fifth as country with the ‘most political and strategic influence’,⁶ after failing to rank under either metric in 2021. This is indicative of the future role regional states envision for the UK in Southeast Asia. This analysis suggests ways in which the UK can capitalise on these growing sentiments.

A UK security presence can promote stability in Southeast Asia. This will help the UK to achieve its aims of upholding an open international order and maintaining access to vital international trade routes, while supporting the autonomy of regional allies. The UK can also leverage the advantages offered by its recent Dialogue Partner status to gain membership of other multilateral forums, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), in addition to formalising economic relations through regional trade partnerships. As Dialogue Partner, the UK gains deeper access to ASEAN and its other dialogue partners, in

1. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, CP 403 (UK: The Stationery Office, March 2021).
2. Sharon Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 Survey Report* (February 2021), p. 34, <<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>>, accessed 22 May 2022.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 23.



HMS *Queen Elizabeth* at Changi Naval Base in Singapore, October 2021. Courtesy of Reuters / Edgar Su / Alamy Stock

addition to enhanced practical cooperation in areas of mutual economic and political interest. Dialogue Partner status benefits the UK by providing it with a voice at Indo-Pacific security and defence forums, helping the UK to strengthen bilateral relations with forum members, which could then be used as a stepping-stone to greater economic cooperation. Further success in these areas is dependent on several factors. In the security realm, regional states will be looking to the UK to help mitigate, rather than exacerbate, US–China security competition. Economically, ASEAN’s recent success finalising the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) means that it now has access to the world’s largest free trade zone. ASEAN can therefore enter any future trade negotiations with the UK from a position of strength. Critically, the states of Southeast Asia will be looking for a sustained UK commitment to the region that upholds and respects ASEAN centrality in Southeast Asia. The challenge for the UK will be meeting these expectations while securing its own interests in a region of geostrategic importance.

UK Relations in Southeast Asia: An Overview

The UK began to seek closer relations with the Asia-Pacific region during the 2010–15 Coalition government led by David Cameron. The 2015 *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review* committed to strengthening security and prosperity partnerships throughout Asia.⁷ It recognised that the region presents ‘significant economic opportunities for the UK, and considerable influence on the future integrity and credibility of the rules-based international order’.⁸ In a 2012 speech in Malaysia, then Prime Minister Cameron heralded a new era in UK–Southeast Asia relations, stating that the ‘era of benign neglect is over’.⁹ The statement coincided with UK accession to ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the regional organisation’s legally binding code for inter-state relations. The government’s Asia-focused strategy gained significant momentum following the Brexit referendum in 2016. Then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson announced: ‘Britain is back East of Suez’

7. HM Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, Cm 9161 (London: The Stationery Office, 2015), p. 50.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
9. Jürgen Haacke and John Harley Breen, ‘From Benign Neglect to Effective Re-Engagement? Assessing British Strategizing and Policies Towards Southeast Asia Since 2010’, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* (Vol. 41, No. 3, 2019), p. 330.

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in a speech in December 2016.¹⁰ In the referendum's wake, the UK announced a 'Global Britain' strategy that 'intended to signal that the UK will ... continue to be open, inclusive and outward facing' to respond to global challenges in an 'increasingly complex, interconnected and volatile world'.¹¹

ASEAN and Southeast Asia are a critical component of the UK's 'tilt' to the Indo-Pacific, as explained in the government's 2021 Integrated Review. The strategy confirms that 'the Indo-Pacific region matters to the UK: it is critical to our economy, our security and our global ambition'.¹² As part of this strategy, the UK will 'adapt to the regional balance of power and respect the interests of others' while seeking 'to work with existing structures such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations'.¹³ The UK confirms a strategic approach that uses ASEAN as a vehicle to enhance relations with its 10 member states.¹⁴ It also capitalises on areas of mutual interest, citing a deep commitment to multilateralism and a desire to work with existing bodies such as ASEAN to strengthen institutions and the international order.¹⁵

Prior to Brexit, the UK's relationship with ASEAN was mediated through the EU; an independent relationship is vital following the country's exit from the EU. ASEAN's rapid growth and young workforce make it an area of significant opportunity for UK businesses and investors. The states that constitute ASEAN vary significantly economically, politically and culturally. There are vast differences in wealth across the group – Singapore and Laos are both ASEAN member states. Despite these disparities, all member states have experienced significant growth since 2000. ASEAN is the world's fifth largest economy. In 2020 it had a combined GDP

of US\$3 trillion¹⁶ and population of 661.8 million.¹⁷ Its total merchandise trade has multiplied by over 3.5 times, reaching more than US\$2.6 trillion in 2020.¹⁸ Southeast Asia also has growing geostrategic significance. It is the site of great power security competition between the US and a rising China, and heightened maritime tensions in the South China Sea, both of which have destabilised the international order.

ASEAN and Southeast Asia are a critical component of the UK's 'tilt' to the Indo-Pacific

UK Strategic Plans and Successes

The UK began to prioritise a greater regional presence in Southeast Asia post-Brexit. This included the establishment of a British Defence Staff in Singapore in 2016, a regional trade commissioner based in Singapore from 2018, a dedicated ambassador to ASEAN in 2019 and new trade deals signed with Singapore and Vietnam in 2020. Trade reviews have also been conducted with Indonesia and Thailand, with a view to future bilateral agreements. A September 2021 Joint Ministerial Declaration on Future Economic Cooperation between ASEAN and the UK identified areas for future cooperation. These included: Covid-19 economic recovery; UK–ASEAN supply chains and maintaining open markets; regulatory frameworks and standards; digital innovation; sustainable growth; skills and education; and public–private sector partnership.¹⁹ A programme of extensive economic cooperation

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10. HM Government, 'Foreign Secretary Speech: "Britain is Back East of Suez"', Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 9 December 2016, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-speech-britain-is-back-east-of-suez>>, accessed 16 September 2022.
 11. HM Government, 'How UK Foreign Policy Responds to an Ever More Challenging Global Environment', Written Evidence – Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FPW0027), Memorandum for the International Relations Committee, February 2018, <<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/international-relations-committee/foreign-policy-in-changed-world-conditions/written/79900.html>>, accessed 17 December 2021.
 12. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, p. 66.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
 16. ASEAN, *ASEAN Key Figures 2021* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2021), p. 33.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
 19. 'Joint Ministerial Declaration on Future Economic Cooperation Between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK)', 15 September 2021, <<https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Joint-Ministerial-Declaration-on-Future-Economic-Cooperation-between-ASEAN.pdf>>, accessed 15 December 2021.

raises the possibility of a future UK–ASEAN free trade agreement (FTA), something that the EU has been attempting to implement, unsuccessfully, since 2007. A UK–ASEAN FTA does not appear to be a current priority for the regional bloc, however. This is likely due to its focus on establishing RCEP, the world’s largest free trade zone that covers a third of world trade. The UK formally applied to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in February 2021, of which four ASEAN states are currently members. If successful, it may also seek deeper engagement or accession to RCEP. However, the UK is not currently prioritising RCEP. In a UK Parliament debate in the Lords Chamber, the RCEP was described as ‘a much shallower and less significant partnership than the CPTPP’.²⁰ The CPTPP was cited as a priority for the UK, representing a ‘significantly deeper agreement that will set standards globally in a large number of areas’.²¹

Frameworks for greater UK–ASEAN relations also include becoming an ASEAN Dialogue Partner ‘to work together on global challenges, support ASEAN’s central role in regional stability and prosperity and enable sustainable development in South East Asia’.²² The UK was granted Dialogue Partner status in August 2021. The Dialogue Partnership with the UK was the first to be concluded in 25 years, paving the way for cooperation on trade, investment, climate change, the environment, technology and education. Following its application to become Dialogue Partner, the UK foreign secretary attended two UK–ASEAN Ministerial Meetings and hosted the ASEAN Chair at the G7 Foreign and Development Ministers meeting in May 2021.²³ As Dialogue Partner, ASEAN will expect the UK to help to fund

and support joint projects and commit funding and technical support for ASEAN initiatives.²⁴ The UK can also use its Dialogue Partner status to increase its multilateral engagement with ASEAN through participation in the ARF and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). Membership of these forums is not guaranteed, requiring the approval of all states and a lift on the moratorium on new members.²⁵ The UK applied for ADMM-Plus Experts Working Groups (EWGs) observer status in 2018, although this was vetoed by Russia and China. As part of an August 2022 Plan of Action to implement UK Dialogue Partnership, the UK will explore UK engagement with the ADMM-Plus, including where it can add value to EWGs through proposed observer programmes.²⁶

The UK began to prioritise a greater regional presence in Southeast Asia post-Brexit

The UK already had a modest security presence in Southeast Asia prior to its exit from the EU. This included a permanent military presence in ASEAN members Brunei and Singapore, and membership of the 1971 Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) pact alongside Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore. The UK regularly participates in joint FPDA exercises, including one hosted by Singapore in August 2021 designed to enhance interoperability between the five members. Post-Brexit, the UK aims to strengthen Indo-Pacific ‘defence and security cooperation, including in maritime security’.²⁷ In a March 2021 Defence Command Paper, the UK government committed itself to a more ‘proactive ... persistent presence’ in regions of interest, including

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20. *Hansard*, House of Lords, ‘Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership’, Volume 808, debated on Tuesday 15 December 2020.
 21. *Ibid.*
 22. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, p. 67.
 23. British Embassy Manila, ‘UK Becomes ASEAN Dialogue Partner’, 6 August 2021, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-becomes-asean-dialogue-partner>>, accessed 12 December 2021.
 24. Jürgen Haacke and John Harley Breen, ‘Future Options for the UK-ASEAN Economic Relationship’, Briefing Paper for the workshop co-organised by the UK-ASEAN Business Council (UKABC) and the LSE Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre (LSE SEAC), 27 June 2018, p. 13, <<https://www.lse.ac.uk/seac/assets/documents/LSE-SEAC-UKABC-Paper.pdf>>, accessed 12 December 2021.
 25. Ian Storey and Hoang Thi Ha, ‘“Global Britain” and Southeast Asia: Progress and Prospects’, *ISEAS Perspective* (Issue 2021, No. 130, October 2021), p. 4.
 26. HM Government, ‘Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-United Kingdom Dialogue Partnership (2022 to 2026)’, Policy Paper, 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>>, accessed 16 September 2022.
 27. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, p. 67.

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the Indo-Pacific.²⁸ The UK has enhanced its security presence in the region to achieve this goal, providing counter-terrorism expertise to Southeast Asian security and law enforcement agencies, and establishing a regional counterterrorism and extremism unit at its High Commission in Kuala Lumpur.²⁹

Engagements with ASEAN members including Brunei, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand show a commitment to regional security and Southeast Asian allies

Security cooperation with ASEAN member states has paved the way for greater UK power projection in Southeast Asia. On 24 July 2021, HMS *Richmond* undertook an exercise with the Royal Thai Navy. In April 2021 HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, along with a UK carrier strike group comprising 10 warships, began its first operational deployment in Asia and the contested waters of the South China Sea. Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said: ‘When our Carrier Strike Group sets sail next month, it will be flying the flag for Global Britain – projecting our influence, signalling our power, [and] engaging with our friends’.³⁰ The Carrier Strike Group is an important demonstration of the UK’s tilt. Engagements with ASEAN members including Brunei, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand show a commitment to regional security and Southeast Asian allies. UK security policy in Southeast Asia supports US strategy for the region. Like the US, the UK has an interest in maintaining freedom of navigation for international trade through the region’s waters and upholding an international order in Asia. Maritime

activities will include training and capacity-building for regional states, humanitarian and disaster relief operations, and UK power projection.³¹

Obstacles, Challenges and the View from ASEAN

The ASEAN states have navigated different power configurations in Southeast Asia since the end of the Cold War, implementing strategies that allow them to coexist among the great powers, while resisting hostile balance-of-power politics.³² They have achieved some success in this regard by adopting a strategy that combines some elements of great power acceptance through collaboration or partnership with some power rejection, particularly with regards to formalised security and defence cooperation.³³ By adopting this strategy, ASEAN has been able to pursue greater regional integration, while ‘embarking on an ambitious economic and diplomatic effort to give regional actors a stake in regional cooperation, growth and stability’.³⁴ Growing geopolitical competition in Southeast Asia has strained ASEAN’s ability to hedge between the great powers. As a result of China’s increasingly assertive behaviour in areas such as the South China Sea, US President Joe Biden has called on regional allies in Southeast Asia to help counter China’s influence.³⁵ This increased competition has given new impetus to the UK–ASEAN relationship. ASEAN’s desire to maintain the status quo in Southeast Asia through a non-aligned strategy has coincided with the UK’s desire to re-engage with the Indo-Pacific.

In light of these geopolitical considerations, ASEAN ultimately welcomes greater cooperation with the UK in areas of mutual interest. The UK is ASEAN’s 12th largest trading partner and sixth largest source of foreign direct investment.³⁶ A UK Mission to ASEAN looks to extend UK soft power

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28. Louisa Brooke-Holland, ‘Defence Command Paper 2021: Summary’, House of Commons Briefing Paper, Number 9181, 19 March 2021.
 29. Ian Storey, ‘The United Kingdom and Southeast Asia after Brexit’, *ISEAS Perspective* (Issue 2019, No. 33, 23 April 2019).
 30. *Sky News*, ‘Deployment of HMS Queen Elizabeth and Carrier Strike Group Will “Fly Flag for Global Britain”’, 26 April 2021.
 31. Storey and Hoang Thi Ha, ‘“Global Britain” and Southeast Asia’, p. 9.
 32. John David Ciorciari, ‘The Balance of Great-Power Influence in Contemporary Southeast Asia’, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* (Vol. 9, No. 1, 2009), p. 160.
 33. Cheng-Chwee Kuik, ‘How Do Weaker States Hedge? Unpacking ASEAN States’ Alignment Behaviour towards China’, *Journal of Contemporary China* (Vol. 25, No. 100, 2016), p. 502.
 34. Ciorciari, ‘The Balance of Great-Power Influence in Contemporary Southeast Asia’, p. 158.
 35. Joseph R Biden Jr, ‘Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy after Trump’, *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2020).
 36. Frederick Kliem, ‘Is ASEAN Too “Far East” or Just Right for Global Britain’, *East Asia Forum*, 4 June 2021, <<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/06/04/is-asean-too-far-east-or-just-right-for-global-britain/>>, accessed 9 December 2021.

into the region by working with member state embassies to deepen engagement and explore new political-security, economic and socio-cultural collaboration. The UK is also engaging with ASEAN on the region's post-Covid-19 pandemic recovery through an ASEAN–UK Troika Dialogue. Troika dialogues consist of meetings between ASEAN and UK ministers with the aim of developing friendly relations and holding mutually beneficial discussions. As part of the troika, Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan 'reiterated Singapore's strong and consistent support for the UK's continued engagement of ASEAN post-Brexit'.³⁷ The UK benefits from regional champions that support a UK presence in Southeast Asia. It will need to develop bilateral relations beyond historic allies such as Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei if it is to be fully accepted into the region. Strengthening relations with Indonesia will be crucial in this regard. ASEAN's most populous country has traditionally been viewed as de facto leader of ASEAN, in addition to being a secular democracy. Recognising the importance of Indonesia for Southeast Asia, the UK unveiled a UK–Indonesia Partnership Roadmap in 2022 to deepen relations by 2030. Stronger relations with Vietnam are also important, as Asia's fastest growing economy and one of the ASEAN states under threat in the South China Sea. UK–Vietnam engagement has increased significantly in recent years. Vietnam supported British membership in regional diplomatic and economic blocs such as ASEAN and the CPTPP.³⁸ Both agreed a joint refreshed strategic partnership agreement in September 2020. They have also strengthened trade partnership through a Joint Economic and Trade Committee in 2022.

The achievement of Dialogue Partner status is testament to UK–ASEAN deepening engagement. It is likely the UK will seek an FTA with the bloc, in addition to bilateral FTAs with ASEAN member states. As noted by Jürgen Haacke and John Harley Breen, 'building a formal relationship may be a pre-requisite for strong and effective UK-ASEAN

relations in the future and could affect the extent to which HMG [Her Majesty's Government] is able to promote the interests of UK business in the region'.³⁹ Formalising an FTA with ASEAN will come with significant challenges, however. These include navigating disparities in intra-ASEAN development, managing member state protectionist policies and foreign ownership restrictions, and tackling issues of democracy and governance considering the dubious human rights records of some ASEAN member states. ASEAN's recent success with RCEP means it may also be less receptive to an FTA with the UK. ASEAN 'will likely bargain hard and press Britain to make certain concessions in exchange for its greater access into their markets. ASEAN members' demands may be too much for Britain to accept'.⁴⁰

The ASEAN states have navigated different power configurations in Southeast Asia since the end of the Cold War

UK admission to additional ASEAN-led institutions such as the ARF or East Asia Summit may also impact the regional power balance. Ian Storey and Hoang Thi Ha argue that 'admission of the UK is seen as tipping the balance in favour of the US and its allies and partners within these mechanisms', a point that risks antagonising China.⁴¹ This makes the 2020 announcement of a trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS) for the Indo-Pacific region a potential challenge for Southeast Asia and ASEAN. AUKUS has exposed the lack of common interests and threat perceptions within the regional organisation.⁴² The Indonesian Foreign Ministry stated it was 'very concerned about the continued arms race and projection of power in the region'.⁴³ This view was shared by the Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob, who feared it would 'provoke other powers to act more

37. *Straits Times*, 'Asean-UK Troika Dialogue Focuses on Post-pandemic Recovery', 8 April 2021.

38. Bill Hayton and John Hemmings, *Enhancing British–Vietnamese Relations in A More Competitive Era*, Council on Geostrategy, Policy Paper No. SBIPP06, October 2021, p. 2.

39. Haacke and Breen, 'Future Options for the UK-ASEAN Economic Relationship', p. 3.

40. Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit, 'The Post-Brexit World: Closer UK-ASEAN Economic Ties?', RSIS Commentary, No. 227, 11 November 2019, <<https://www.think-asia.org/bitstream/handle/11540/11882/CO19227.pdf?sequence=1>>, accessed 17 December 2021, p. 3.

41. Storey and Hoang Thi Ha, "'Global Britain" and Southeast Asia', p. 6.

42. Laura Southgate, 'AUKUS: The View from ASEAN', *The Diplomat*, 23 September 2021.

43. *Radio Free Asia*, 'Southeast Asian Nations Cautious Over New AUKUS Defense Pact', 17 September 2021, <<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/aucus-southeastasia-09172021164007.html>>, accessed 17 December 2021.

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aggressively in the region, especially in the South China Sea'.⁴⁴ Despite a risk-averse approach to AUKUS, both Malaysia and Indonesia have continued to pursue closer relations with the UK. The UK has also solidified its position as a trusted extra-regional power as shown in the 2022 Southeast Asia survey. This suggests that AUKUS has not unduly damaged regional perceptions of the UK, particularly among ASEAN internal actors. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong welcomed the AUKUS arrangement by stating that it would 'contribute constructively to the peace and stability of the region and complement the regional architecture'.⁴⁵ The Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte was similarly positive in September 2021, stating 'the enhancement of a near abroad ally's ability to project power should restore and keep the balance rather than destabilize it'.⁴⁶ Despite AUKUS members vocalising their support for ASEAN and its central role in the region, there is a fear that AUKUS risks undermining ASEAN centrality in favour of externally driven security arrangements.⁴⁷

The UK's ability to commit the necessary resources for a permanent security presence in Asia has also been questioned. For Storey, 'the UK's strategic focus will remain on the Euro-Atlantic area, and especially the requirement to respond to an increasingly assertive Russia'.⁴⁸ This argument is particularly salient following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The counterargument is that the UK has other methods of upholding security in the Euro-Atlantic region, including nuclear deterrence, land-based missile systems and fast naval power redeployment if necessary.⁴⁹ As such, there does not need to be a trade-off between maintaining a security presence in the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic. Southeast Asia has been broadly receptive to an increased UK security presence due to deteriorating US–China relations and increased great power security competition. As Lynn Kuok observes, the states of Southeast Asia view a greater

UK security presence as a means to 'maintain the balance of power, take the edge off US–China rivalry and expand the region's strategic options'.⁵⁰ This includes training on security and maritime law to help regional states assert their maritime rights, building domestic and regional capabilities to support regional states in combating transnational organised crime, and cooperation on the peaceful use of nuclear technology.⁵¹

The UK's ability to commit the necessary resources for a permanent security presence in Asia has also been questioned

However, this optimism was tempered by 'lingering doubts about the UK's staying power in the region' caused by the economic impact for the UK of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic.⁵² While it is hoped that the UK may help to mitigate security competition in Asia and assist regional states in hedging the great powers, the announcement of AUKUS and China's response risk inflaming, rather than diffusing, regional tensions.

Conclusion

UK economic, diplomatic and security commitments towards Southeast Asia are a notable post-Brexit success story. The UK's Dialogue Partner status with ASEAN is a significant diplomatic achievement, which can pave the way for greater integration and entry into regional multilateral forums. Regional power projection through the UK Carrier Strike Group has been largely welcomed by ASEAN states due to increasing US–China tensions and

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44. Chris Barrett and James Massola, 'Malaysia Warns AUKUS Pact will Spark Nuclear Arms Race in Indo-Pacific', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 September 2021.
 45. Ravil Shirodkar, 'Malaysia Says AUKUS Alliance May Lead to Arms Race, Provocation', *Bloomberg*, 18 September 2021.
 46. Gurjit Singh, 'The ASEAN Disunity over AUKUS', Observer Research Foundation, 27 October 2021, <<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-asean-disunity-over-aukus/>>, accessed 19 December 2021.
 47. Southgate, 'AUKUS: The View from ASEAN'.
 48. Storey, 'The United Kingdom and Southeast Asia after Brexit', p. 6.
 49. Philip Shetler-Jones, 'The Euro-Atlantic or the Indo-Pacific: A False Choice', Council on Geostrategy, 15 July 2021, <<https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/britains-world/the-euro-atlantic-or-the-indo-pacific-a-false-choice/>>, accessed 16 September 2022.
 50. Lynn Kuok, 'From Withdrawal to Indo-Pacific "Tilt": Southeast Asia Welcomes Enhanced British Security Presence', *IJSS Analysis*, 11 August 2021.
 51. HM Government, 'Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-United Kingdom Dialogue'.
 52. Kuok, 'From Withdrawal to Indo-Pacific "Tilt"'.

ongoing sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea. Economically, the UK's assistance in regional Covid-19 recovery and funding for ASEAN projects and initiatives benefits the region while allowing the UK access to a dynamic and growing market. This has resulted in the UK adopting a 'preferred and trusted strategic partner' status for ASEAN members.⁵³

There is significant potential for the UK to capitalise on its existing success to achieve deeper integration with ASEAN and Southeast Asia

The next step for the UK is to flesh out its relationship with ASEAN through joint projects and diplomatic negotiations. The UK and ASEAN share several areas of mutual interest, including a respect for multilateralism and the international, open order, and a desire to maintain stability in Southeast Asia. There are areas of divergence however, including differing perspectives on governance, democracy and human rights. The challenge for the UK is to balance its core economic, security and political interests in Asia against those of ASEAN. The UK can overcome these challenges through soft power initiatives and practical economic support for humanitarian projects and infrastructure in the region. Examples include support for Covid-19 recovery, including the donation of vaccines, grants

and funding to promote education, arts and cultural exchanges, UK investment in renewable energy sources and capacity-building for clean transport and urbanisation, and funding and provision of humanitarian assistance in the wake of natural disasters.

The greater challenge will be navigating US–China security competition and the UK's position within the existing balance of power. As an ally of the US and a member of AUKUS, the UK risks destabilising UK–China relations and upsetting those ASEAN members that support China or favour regional neutrality. The UK can allay regional fears by focusing on regional state maritime capacity-building and cooperation, freedom of navigation, and peaceful maritime dispute resolution. There is significant potential for the UK to capitalise on its existing success to achieve deeper integration with ASEAN and Southeast Asia. This will be predicated on a sustained commitment of diplomatic, economic and security resources to the region. Of these, funding initiatives will be particularly welcomed by ASEAN, in addition to the UK's vocal support for ASEAN centrality in Southeast Asia. ■

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53. Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia*, p. 34.