



House of Commons
Defence Committee

UK Defence and the Indo-Pacific: Government Response to the Committee's Eleventh Report of Session 2022–23

Third Special Report of
Session 2023–24

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The Defence Committee

The Defence Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Ministry of Defence and its associated public bodies.

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Publications

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Third Special Report

The Defence Committee published its Eleventh Report of Session 2022–23 [*UK Defence and the Indo-Pacific*](#) (HC 183) on 24 October 2023. The Government's response was received on 22 December 2023 and is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

Introduction

The Government welcomes the interest of the Defence Committee in the role that Defence is playing in the Indo-Pacific and its report “UK Defence and the Indo-Pacific,” published on 24 October 2023.

The Indo-Pacific is a region of great importance to the UK. We share deep historic friendships and common values and objectives with many in the region: upholding the Rules-Based International Order, the right to sovereignty, and the importance of global trade. The Indo-Pacific also offers overwhelming economic opportunities. Sixty per cent of global shipping trade passes through its seas and half the world's population live there.

Alongside our regional partners, we believe in a free and open Indo-Pacific, where states are free from coercion, the interests of regional powers are balanced, and the rule of law is upheld. Instability in the region would be catastrophic, imperilling thousands of lives and suffocating the global economy. It is for these reasons that the UK is committed to Indo-Pacific security.

The whole of Government Indo-Pacific tilt, as articulated in the 2021 Integrated Review (IR), was an ambitious demonstration of the UK's diverse and varied interests in the region. Defence forms an essential element of the UK's integrated long-term contribution to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific. This requires engaging all levers of defence to deepen our engagement with the region's multilateral organisations as well as individual nations, increase exports, and enhance technological exchange.

The Committee concludes that Defence has not achieved its tilt to the Indo-Pacific. The Government is clear that we have achieved the ambition set for Defence when the tilt was launched in IR21. We have increased our military presence including through our persistent maritime deployments, expanded our defence network, increased our exercising across all three services including Royal Airforce contributions to Exercise PITCH BLACK in Australia, the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) Exercise BERSAMA LIMA and Army involvement in Exercise VIGILANT ISLES with Japan.

However, IR21 made it clear that Defence's activities in the region would go far beyond the presence of military forces. As such, our priority has been on deepening our relationships with our allies and partners. The UK has developed new relationships with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and upgraded our contribution to FPDA. We have created ground-breaking new approaches through AUKUS and the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP). We have enhanced our bilateral defence relationships across the region including with Japan, India, the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Indonesia. We have contributed to capacity building and strengthening resilience in the Pacific and

increased our collaboration with partners on an ever expanding number of domains including maritime security, cyber and counterterrorism. All of this has contributed to enhancing peace and security in the region.

Defence's major achievements in the Indo-Pacific include:

- Delivering two major defence and security partnerships in the form of AUKUS with the US and Australia and the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) with Italy and Japan to strengthen Atlantic-Pacific security ties.
- Building on the Defence and Security pillar of the 2030 Roadmap for India-UK Future Relations. This includes a maritime partnership in the Western Indian Ocean and increased capability cooperation
- Securing the Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) Treaty with Japan to deepen the coordination and complexity of our military activity.
- Deepening defence and security ties with the Republic of Korea, including through the Downing Street Accord signed by the Prime Minister in November this year plus a defence and security cooperation Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).
- Agreeing a new Strategic Partnership with Singapore, strengthening cooperation and unlocking deepening partnerships and collaboration in defence and the digital, cyber and information domains.
- Agreeing a UK-Indonesia Partnership Roadmap to 2024 to deepen bilateral cooperation, including in technology and digital, investment and trade, and defence and maritime security.
- Achieving Dialogue Partner status with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2022, the first country to do so this century allowing us to engage with ASEAN in its central role in regional stability. We have applied formally for the ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting Plus grouping and are Observers on a number of its Expert Working Groups.
- Growing the Global Defence Network, with representation to over 20 countries in the Indo-Pacific, including establishing a Defence Adviser to Fiji, a new resident Defence Attaché to the Philippines and a non-resident Defence Attaché to Cambodia.
- Demonstrating our commitment to the region and our interoperability with the US and other international partners including the Netherlands, Canada, New Zealand and Japan on HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH'S maiden operational voyage, as part of Carrier Strike Group 2021.
- Delivering the first Royal Navy permanent presence for more than 25 years through the deployment of HMS SPEY and HMS TAMAR.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of Defence's activity in the Indo-Pacific.

The network of UK defence and security partnerships across the region continues to deepen and evolve, but our intent is clear - the UK is working intensively with partners across the Indo-Pacific to invest in our defence and security relationships.

We challenge the Committee's recommendation that a published Indo-Pacific strategy is necessary. Our objectives in the Indo-Pacific have been made clear in IR21 and Defence Command Paper (DCP21). This was reflected in the Integrated Review Refresh 2023 (IRR23) and Defence Command Paper Refresh 2023 (DCPR23).

We have contributed to align cross-government interests in the Indo-Pacific, making the region a permanent pillar of the UK's international policy. The Integrated Review Refresh placed the tilt on a long-term strategic footing through further strengthening our presence, deepening our partnerships, robustly defending international norms and values, and helping grow regional resilience.

The next deployment of the Carrier Strike Group into the Indo-Pacific (CSG25) will focus on the Indo-Pacific and will be international by design, including participation from European and Indo-Pacific partners to enhance interoperability and integration. In addition, the Royal Navy's Littoral Response Group South (LRG(S)) will deploy agile and scalable amphibious capability to the region. We will continue to strengthen our country to country and multilateral relationships, including building on our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with India and delivering our ambitions with Japan, set out in the Hiroshima Accord and the Global Combat Air Programme.

The Government acknowledges China's global importance and its influence within the Indo-Pacific. We note however, that China presents a global – not regional challenge. We also recognise China's increasing international assertiveness and its large scale investment in military modernisation. We have articulated our policy on China in the IRR23 – where we set out our three interrelated work strands of Protect, Align and Engage and in the Foreign Secretary April 2023 Mansion House speech.

The Government does not believe that the UK's relationship with China is set on a predetermined course. Our preference is for predictability and stability, underpinned by open and constructive relations. However, our relationship with China depends on the choices China makes; it will be made harder if trends towards greater authoritarianism and assertiveness overseas continue.

Since the Committee started its work on the Indo-Pacific, we have seen a broader trend of growing global instability. War in Europe following Russia illegal invasion of Ukraine and recent events in the Middle East demonstrate that the world is becoming more volatile and uncertain. This changing environment reinforces the need to engage broadly and carefully to address challenges to our national security.

Our adversaries do not divide the world into operating theatres, instead they seek to project their influence globally; we therefore must do the same. Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security are inextricably linked. A successful Russian assault on Ukraine's sovereignty risks encouraging threat actors across the world. Whilst Euro-Atlantic security and our alliance within NATO will remain our highest priority for national security, Defence will continue to deliver on our long-term objectives in the Indo-Pacific; it will be constructive

and distinctive. We will continue to focus on strengthening our bilateral relationships and integrating the UK into multilateral fora to maintain our stable and enduring role in the region.

The Government has responded to each of the Committee's specific conclusions and recommendations in turn. The Committee's text is in bold, and the Government's response is below. Recommendation numbers relate to the numbers provided for recommendations and conclusions in the Committee's report.

China

Recommendation 1. The Chinese Government's wider goal to achieve regional and global dominance— and the increasingly aggressive means by which it is pursuing this, highlight the long-term and strategic threat that China poses to the rules-based international order. It appears that China intends to confront Taiwan, whether by direct military action or 'grey zone' attacks, in the coming years. Any conflict in Taiwan will have formidable consequences across the globe and risks the international rules-based order. The Government and the UK Armed Forces must ensure that they have plans for the UK's response co-ordinated with allies and partners—to a range of actions by China against Taiwan. The Government should set out these plans to the Committee in a classified private briefing. (Paragraph 19)

The IR21 and IRR23 highlight China's increasing international assertiveness. China's willingness to use all the levers of state power to achieve a dominant role in global affairs, combined with its more aggressive stance in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, are threatening to create a world defined by danger, disorder and division; an international order more favourable to authoritarianism.

The UK has a clear interest in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. We consider the Taiwan issue one to be settled peacefully by the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait through constructive dialogue, without the threat or use of force or coercion. We do not support any unilateral attempts to change the status quo. This includes increased Chinese assertiveness towards Taiwan.

We are increasingly concerned by the consequences should peace and stability fail in the Taiwan Strait, including global supply chains and the regional economy. We have restated the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait alongside our G7 partners.

The Government has conducted and continues to conduct crisis planning against a wide range of possible scenarios globally, to ensure we are suitably prepared to respond to threats to the UK and our interests around the world; this covers all levers of government. The Government notes the Committee's request for a private briefing. The Government would be happy to provide one on Defence's crisis planning process.

Recommendation 2. The Committee supports the Government's assessment that China under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is "an epoch-defining and systemic challenge." China seeks to erode the current rules-based international order by exploiting weaknesses in the system. Rather than looking to act as the world's policeman in a mutually beneficial system, China's interest is in establishing dominance over its wider region to purely Chinese advantage. In military terms,

China's publicly stated ambition to "fight and win" global wars by 2049 illustrates the threat it poses to international security. An important waypoint is China's goal of establishing a fully modernised military—and a peer adversary of the United States—by 2027. *The Government should carry out an assessment of China under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to consider whether it should be labelled as a threat to national and international security.* (Paragraph 24)

As we outlined in IRR23, the Government recognises that China under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is a systemic challenge with implications for almost every area of government policy and the everyday lives of British people. The CCP is explicit in its aim to shape a China centric international order more favourable to its authoritarian system. It has pursued rapid and opaque military modernisation, underpinned by colossal military investment.

IRR23 also states that in responding to this systemic challenge, the UK's policy towards China will be anchored in our core national interests and our higher interest in an open and stable international order based on the UN Charter and international law. This means that we will take swift and robust action to protect our interests if they are threatened by the CCP's actions and intent. It also means that where it is consistent with our interests, we will engage constructively with the Chinese government, business and people. Under this policy the Government is aligned with our closest allies and partners and will advance British interests whilst defending our security and values.

The Government therefore disagrees that there is a need to carry out an assessment of how to label China under the Chinese Communist Party. As the then Foreign Secretary set out in his Mansion House speech, to sum up China itself in one word – whether 'threat' or 'partner' or 'adversary' would be impossible, impractical and unwise.

The UK's approach to the Indo-Pacific

Recommendation 3. The UK's regional military presence in the Indo-Pacific remains limited and the strategy to which it contributes is unclear. This contrasts to both the US—a global and Pacific power—and to France—a more comparable actor to the UK in terms of geography, scale, and military capability. Without a larger permanent presence, it is unlikely that the UK would be able to make a substantial contribution to allied efforts in the event of conflict in the region. In order to deliver this, the Government must make a choice as to whether it will increase resources in the region or rebalance current resources towards the Indo-Pacific. *The Ministry of Defence should pursue closer cooperation with the United States and France and continue to pursue basing with other regional allies. All of these efforts should be consolidated into a single, cross-government strategy for the Indo-Pacific which states how the UK's military instruments should be utilised in both peacetime and during conflict.* (Paragraph 44)

Recommendation 13. The UK Government's future strategy for the Indo-Pacific is still unclear. *The Government should create a dedicated Indo-Pacific strategy, which sets out how military instruments can be used in support of the UK's wider pursuit of its goals and interests in the region in peacetime and during conflict. Within this strategy, the Ministry of Defence should include a comprehensive defence and diplomatic response to*

the growing threat posed by China under the CCP. This strategy should also identify the specific aims of the Tilt and make clear how the Government intends to achieve these, whilst being realistic about what is achievable. (Paragraph 97)

While we support the Committee's recommendation to deepen cooperation with our Euro-Atlantic and regional partners in the Indo-Pacific and recognise the need to maintain secure basing in region, the Government does not believe it needs to publish a dedicated strategy on the Indo-Pacific.

The Government has published its vision and its strategic intent for the Indo-Pacific in the original IR21, the IRR23 as well as Defence's specific aims in the DCP21 and 2023's updated version.

We acknowledge that the Defence presence and resource in the Indo-Pacific is not effective alone. That is why we are deepening our bilateral ties to place our approach in the region on a long term, sustainable footing. In doing so, we have prioritised our coordination with partners, focused on maintaining security and stability in the Indo-Pacific. This includes the US and France but also our partners in the region including Japan, Republic of Korea (ROK), India, Indonesia, FPDA members and Five Eyes partners.

The DCP23 laid out our 'campaigning approach' which brings together all the levers of Defence – not only military, but also informational, economic and defence diplomatic – in conjunction with wider Government, elements of the private sector, and with our allies and partners to focus ourselves on the evolving threat context globally.

The Government shares the view of the Committee on the importance of closer cooperation with the United States and France. Working with our partners in the region is allowing us to improve our interoperability and align our efforts to achieve stronger collective strategic impact against regional threats. In coordinating with our partners, our goal is to enable a persistent, effective, and joint Pacific-Atlantic presence.

The United States

The US remains the UK's most important strategic ally. The depth of this relationship—from intelligence co-operation to policy and military coordination – remains an essential pillar of our security. It has been further strengthened through our co-ordinated response to the war in Ukraine and other measures such as the New Atlantic Charter. Our interlinked defence relationship enables us to train and operate together and spans the globe. We have an ambitious exercise programme with the US throughout the Indo-Pacific; this ranges from Exercise PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP alongside the US Navy and Coastguard in the Philippines to participation in the multilateral exercise RIMPAC in the Pacific. We further demonstrated our ability to deploy at scale to the Indo-Pacific with the US alongside other allies during the Carrier Strike Group (CSG) 2021.

France

The UK and France very much agree on the importance of securing a free and open Indo-Pacific. The March 2023 UK-France Summit reaffirmed our longstanding friendship and partnership and committed to regular strategic dialogues on the Indo-Pacific. We also agreed to undertake to coordinate our carrier deployments to provide complementary and

more persistent European presence in regions of shared interest. Moreover, bilateral co-ordination with France is already underway for the Offshore Patrol Vessels' deployment to the Indo-Pacific. We will also cooperate on issues affecting Small Island Developing States, such as access to finance and economic resilience including in the Indo-Pacific, where some Pacific Islands face critical challenges.

Regional Access

We agree with the Committee on the importance of basing and access. The UK already has a global network of operational and logistic support bases that enables us to play a leading role in delivering international security. Diego Garcia, the main island and military base in the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), remains important for the defence needs of the UK and US. In Oman, the UK Joint Logistics Support Base at Duqm, helps facilitate Royal Navy deployments to the Indian Ocean, including the ability to support our aircraft carriers.

We retain a military presence in Brunei, through the Resident Infantry Battalion, and in Singapore through the British Defence Singapore Support Unit (BDSSU), alongside our FPDA partners. These provide strategic access points for the UK, enabling us to contribute to regional security through our presence.

We constantly review and improve the methods by which we deliver our commitments to a global presence and routinely consult with our allies and partners on matters related to basing and access. Alongside this, we are making further decisive improvements to our approach to operations and warfighting. Our forces will be versatile and flexible in delivering a range of tasks, founded on modernisation and integration. We are also evolving our forces to ensure they are ready for permanent and persistent global engagement.

China

The UK has made clear our policy on China in the Integrated Review Refresh 2023. We will pursue our policy through three interrelated strands: we will further strengthen our national security protections, deepen our cooperation and increase alignment with our core allies and engage directly with China, where it is in our interests to preserve and create space for open, constructive, predictable, and stable relations.

The Government does not view our relationship with China as set on a predetermined course. Our preference is for better cooperation and understanding, although this will depend on the choices China makes.

The National Security Advisor and his staff within the Cabinet Office coordinates the implementation of our cross-government approach to China. This allows for a coherent view across the extent of China's activity, permitting the Government to prioritise work, assess trade-offs, mitigate risks, and deliver across all departments. The Government welcomes Parliamentary interest in our approach to the Indo-Pacific and China and will continue to keep Parliament informed as this develops.

Our capability partnerships

AUKUS

Recommendation 4. We welcome the announcement of the SSN-AUKUS class submarine, including the increased port visits and the Rotational Force in maintaining a coherent regional presence. The UK must however be realistic and cognisant of the significant hurdles for all AUKUS partners in constructing nuclear-powered submarines. A fundamental challenge is the continuing lack of clarity about how many submarines UK Defence and the Indo-Pacific will ultimately be built, the cost, and the availability of a skilled workforce. *We call on the Government to set out in its response to this Report the anticipated timescale for producing a detailed plan on how much it expects SSN-AUKUS to cost, how it will address the skills shortage, and how many SSN-AUKUS class it will produce. It should also set out any existing plans so far as they exist.* (Paragraph 58)

The Government partially rejects the Committee's request for a plan on AUKUS costs and submarine numbers, while noting its recommendation that it should set out how skills to support AUKUS delivery will be developed.

Decisions about how many submarines the UK requires, along with decisions about how the contract to build the submarines will be awarded, will be made in due course based on the evolving strategic picture.

The UK has already made significant investments to support our submarine delivery, including £2 billion announced last year to support the building of our Dreadnought-class submarines. In addition, the Prime Minister announced that an additional £3 billion will be provided to the MOD over the next two years, which will be spent in a number of areas including modernising the UK's nuclear enterprise and funding the next phase of the AUKUS submarine programme. This will be followed by sustained funding over the next decade to support the SSN-AUKUS programme. Australia has also committed to a proportionate financial investment in the UK submarine industrial base.

Regarding the development of nuclear skills, on 1 August 2023, the Government announced a Nuclear Skills Taskforce. This will directly support AUKUS activity within the wider nuclear sector, bringing together government, private sector employers and academia to meet nuclear skills growth opportunities, and unleash a new generation of nuclear technology.

Recommendation 5. AUKUS offers a tangible opportunity to respond to growing tensions in the Indo-Pacific. Through Pillar 1 AUKUS, the UK can tackle shared challenges together with our allies, with the goal of upholding the rules-based order. Moreover, Pillar 2 offers an immediate avenue for developing the UK's defence capabilities and to access and share critical intelligence and technology. *In the short term, Pillar 2 should be expanded to secure and diversify supply chains for munitions and critical minerals. In the medium term, the Government should consider opportunities to involve other like-minded nations and allies in activities related to the advanced capabilities involved in Pillar Two, but only if this can be achieved without compromising the strong relationships developed between the three AUKUS partners.* (Paragraph 59)

The Government partially agrees with the Committee's recommendations.

AUKUS is one of the UK's most strategically important capability collaborations in decades. Its primary ambition is to strengthen Indo-Pacific and global security. AUKUS Advanced Capabilities, known as Pillar II, involves pursuing a trilateral programme of work across a range of leading edge technologies and capabilities to promote security and stability in the Indo-Pacific. We are pooling our expertise and resources across artificial intelligence and autonomy, hypersonics and counter-hypersonics, quantum technologies, cyber, electronic warfare and underwater battlespace; ensuring that our countries are equipped with the latest and most effective capabilities to defend and uphold stability around the world.

We apply the highest standards and scrutiny to capability development, ensuring that we are continuously monitoring our supply chains for threats, risks and fragilities. As part of this, we support implementation of the UK's Critical Minerals Strategy to promote resilience in critical mineral supply chains, safeguarding UK industry, supporting the clean energy transition, and protecting national security and defence capability. In addition, there are existing arrangements in place, such as the National Technology Industrial Base (NTIB) across the Five Eyes, that AUKUS can leverage to support delivery. AUKUS capability development across all three members will strengthen our combined manufacturing and supply chains, and through deterrence and reassurance, will support keeping lines of communication and effective supply chains open.

We recognise interest from partners in collaborating on Pillar II of AUKUS. The AUKUS Leaders' Statement of April 2022 committed to engaging with allies and close partners as Pillar II lines of effort mature. Though we are making good progress on Pillar II, we collectively agree that we are not yet in a position to consider expanding to additional partners.

The UK's bilateral partnerships in the Indo-Pacific

Japan

Recommendation 6. We welcome the Government's practical efforts in strengthening ties with Japan. Japan is an invaluable ally in the region given its geo-strategic location. *As Japan enhances its own defence posture, the UK should build on these valuable commitments to continue strengthening UK–Japan defence cooperation and remain steadfast allies in the pursuit of a free and open Indo-Pacific region. The UK should plan a programme of joint exercises with the Japanese armed forces and continue collaboration on science and technology programmes as part of the Hiroshima Accord.* (Paragraph 63)

We welcome the Committee's recognition of the significant advancements in the UK's defence relationship with Japan.

The UK is committed to fulfilling the commitments set out in the Hiroshima Accord, which allow for further enhancement of our strategic partnership with one of our closest partners in the region. This includes realising the benefits of the landmark Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) in October 2023 through an ambitious programme of larger, more frequent, complex, and practical joint exercises and planning.

The Secretary of State and then Foreign Secretary's joint visit to Japan in November 2023 affirmed both countries commitment to the implementation of the RAA. The visit, for "2+2" discussions, included a Joint Statement signed by both Secretaries of State and their Japanese counterparts, confirming a "consensus on ensuring the application of the RAA to increase interoperability and realise an even more ambitious programme of more frequent and complex exercises".

Delivery of this commitment began with the most recent iteration of Exercise VIGILANT ISLES which took place from 13–19 November 2023. The UK has nearly doubled its personnel contribution to this year's exercise, with approximately 170 service personnel taking part. Work on agreeing an asset protection mechanism is progressing well. This would allow Japan's Self Defence Forces to provide protection to UK assets under strict criteria which we will be able to reciprocate.

The UK and Japan have further been collaborating to enhance our strategic advantage in science and technology domains. Cooperation is already thriving including through the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) which will utilise Japanese, Italian and UK expertise to bring about a new generation of combat aircraft and enhance our defence capabilities. Our close engagement with Japan's Acquisition, Technology and Logistic Agency (ATLA) and its other government organisations, such as the Aerospace Exploration Agency, the MOU for Space Engagement Talks and our new Semiconductors Partnership, demonstrates that our science and technology relationship continues to thrive.

India

Recommendation 7. *We recommend that the Government focus on achieving a higher level of military benefit for both the Indian and UK armed forces from combined training carried out when the Royal Navy's carrier strike group returns to the Indian Ocean as CSG25 in two years' time.* (Paragraph 73)

Recommendation 8. *We welcome the recent actions taken to enhance UK–India defence cooperation through the 2030 UK-India Roadmap. This relationship is critical not only because of the breadth and depth of our existing and potential cooperation, but also due to India's unique position as a peer to China (in economic terms), whilst also bordering China, and its non-aligned status. The UK must be a reliable partner to India and continue co-operation on defence initiatives and capability building. The Government should work to establish the UK as a top tier defence partner to India through greater government-to-government coordination, and by creating strategic industrial partnerships to provide greater opportunities for the UK defence industry. This should include supporting efforts by India to reduce its dependency on Russian military equipment.* (Paragraph 74)

The Government welcomes the Committee's recognition of the steps taken to deepen the UK's relationship with India and agrees with its recommendations.

India is and will continue to be a key partner in the Indo-Pacific and on the global stage. The UK's relationship with India is a core pillar of our approach to the region. The Defence Command Paper Refresh made a clear acknowledgement of the mutual benefit of collaborating with India including on defence capability. We have committed to working

jointly with India in the Western Indian Ocean, through our defence industries and in shared threat domains, such as counterterrorism, building on the bedrock provided by the UK-India Roadmap.

The UK seeks to pursue “best of class” capability collaboration with India, driven by a robust industrial base and ambitious Research & Development (R&D). To this end MOD has established Defence Partnership-India (DP-I), a bespoke programme office that brings together HMG and industry resource. Its mission is to remove the barriers to India’s choosing British partners on its journey to establish a more resilient and self-sufficient defence industry and to provide specialist support for UK defence companies seeking to expand their presence in India. It will provide the Government of India with a single point of access to the UK’s industry, R&D, academic enterprise, and a consistent legal framework for government to government (G2G) contracting, where appropriate.

The MOD is also committed to improving its interoperability with the Indian armed forces, with the aim of achieving a shared strong and enduring defence and security partnership. We have committed to the return of the UK Carrier Strike Group to the Indo-Pacific in 2025. Whilst planning continues, this will allow for invaluable engagement with India to conduct more complex Carrier Strike exercises than previously.

UK regional engagement

ASEAN

Recommendation 9. The UK must rekindle its statecraft skills and reaffirm its commitment as a reliable partner to countries in South-East Asia and the Pacific, in order to uphold the international rules-based order, given its proximity to China and the political diversity of the region. The Committee welcomes the 2022 UK-ASEAN Action Plan as an opportunity for the UK to institutionalise its regional engagement. *Although not primarily a defence cooperation mechanism, the UK should further its UK Defence and the Indo-Pacific engagement with ASEAN on maritime security, building resilience in member states, and seek to deepen its bilateral relationships with these countries through capacity building exercises. In parallel with this, the UK should continue to strengthen and build productive relationships with South-East Asian states and the Pacific Islands.* (Paragraph 80)

The Government welcomes the Committee’s support for deepening the UK’s relationships with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Pacific Islands and agrees with its recommendation to further its defence engagement with both regions.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations

The UK believes that a strong and unified ASEAN is vital for Indo-Pacific security interests. Its members comprise a diverse range of political views and ASEAN’s ability to cohere this political diversity in a single forum supports de-escalation and constructive dialogue in the region. Engagement with ASEAN is a fundamental part of the UK’s approach to the Indo-Pacific and as a Dialogue Partner, the UK wants to continue deepening our relationship with ASEAN members and fully support the centrality of ASEAN as a political, economic and security forum in the region.

The UK has formally applied to join the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+), the platform for ASEAN and its wider gathering of “Plus” Members to strengthen security and defence cooperation for peace, stability, and development in the region. We have further been accepted into the Expert Working Group (EWG) Observership programme, allowing us to deepen our understanding of regional capabilities and their role in securing peace and security in the region. In October 2023, we concluded our participation in our first ADMM+ EWG on Military Medicine in the Philippines and in December 2023 we will attend the Peacekeeping EWG’s Women Peace and Security Seminar in Japan. We have also applied to join the Maritime and Security EWG for the next cycle of the observer programme.

The UK has continued to engage in mutually beneficial capacity training with ASEAN members, sharing lessons and building regional capability to manage security threats. Royal Navy ships HMS SPEY and HMS TAMAR have worked closely with ASEAN states since late 2021. This includes recent engagement to providing training to local military and coastguard forces throughout the region. Moreover, our package of practical instruction is enabling regional partners to work together, improving collective resistance to coercion and illegal activity in the maritime domain, including through the delivery of legal training, hydrography support, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) courses and Maritime Domain Awareness assistance.

The Pacific Islands

The UK’s desire to engage more with the Pacific Islands remains strong. We are actively working with Pacific Island countries and partners to ensure the region is more secure, stable, and resilient. We agreed a ship-rider agreement with Fiji in 2022, and we are pursuing similar arrangements with Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu among others. Additionally, the Royal Navy has recently renewed an MOU with the US Coastguard to enable joint boarding and enforcement operations in the Pacific. The Brunei Garrison have worked alongside PNG, Fiji, French, US, Australian and New Zealand to support combat, logistics and engineering training initiatives; strengthening the resilience of Pacific Defence Forces.

The UK will continue to seek opportunities to deepen cooperation with ASEAN member states and Pacific Island countries, both through bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, in support of our wider interests of the region.

The Quad

Recommendation 10. It is imperative that the UK strengthens its partnerships with regional allies to maintain and deliver a shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific. AUKUS, ASEAN and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) serve different but valuable purposes in achieving regional security and stability, in line with the UK’s vision for the region. *The UK should not consider seeking membership of the Quad in the short term. The UK should approach its relationship with the Quad incrementally whilst monitoring how the forum and its priorities develop in the coming years. The UK should seek to strengthen its relationship with the Quad through functional engagement in specific working groups and by participating in the more formal Quadplus engagement groups.* (Paragraph 88)

The MOD supports the Committee's conclusion not to seek membership of the Quad at this time and agrees with the recommendation to increase engagement through other channels.

The Quad discusses a wide range of issues: security is but one of them. The members of India, the US, Australia and Japan matter hugely for our Indo-Pacific aspirations – both individually and mini-laterally (including in the Quad format), and the UK remains flexible and open to new ways to build cooperation.

However, the Government has no immediate intention to seek membership of this grouping. We agree that currently the most effective way for us to progress our strategic efforts in the Indo-Pacific is by focusing on bilateral and multilateral functional engagement with Quad members and incremental engagement.

The MOD will continue to prioritise our important bilateral engagement with each Quad member and will look at options for closer practical cooperation, including “Quad Plus” engagement groups. In the future the UK may wish to explore a more formal arrangement with the Quad, but this will be subject to members' views.

FPDA

Recommendation 11. Long-standing membership of the Five Power Defence Arrangements offers opportunities for the UK to lead the defence conversation alongside Australia, in engaging with smaller non-aligned nations in the Indo-Pacific, whilst noting the strategic sensitivities for some of those nations. (Paragraph 91)

The UK takes seriously its long-standing commitment to the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). The FPDA, now in its fifty second year, plays a significant role and contributes in promoting cooperative responses in an increasingly complex regional security environment. In addition to strengthening our bilateral cooperation with longstanding partners, meaningful UK engagement with the FPDA is a credible demonstration of our commitment to the region.

The UK has taken a leading role in shaping the FPDA's contribution to regional security. For example, the UK has encouraged incorporating defensive cyber into future FPDA exercises and led on efforts to maximise training value for the 5th Generation assets of member-nations. We have also worked with our FPDA partners in recognising that non-military challenges, such as climate change and demand for Humanitarian and Disaster Relief responses, will continue to grow and should be incorporated into FPDA planning. These efforts have helped ensure that the UK continues to make a strong and positive contribution to the FPDA.

The FPDA emphasises its transparency through increased observer programs. The grouping meets with ASEAN member states twice yearly, ahead of FPDA's Exercise BERSAMA SHIELD and Exercise BERSAMA LIMA. The UK remains committed to building regional confidence that the FPDA is defensive in nature and not targeted against any particular country, whilst supporting the Arrangements' capacity to deal with current and future threats.

The UK's ambitions in the Indo-Pacific

Recommendation 12. Defence was only a small element of the so-called Indo-Pacific 'Tilt' outlined in the 2021 Integrated Review and the Defence Command Paper. The result has been a modest increase in UK military presence in the region. This has manifested primarily through increased presence in the region of naval capabilities, and an increase in defence diplomacy and work on enhancing relationships with allies. The Government states that the tilt is now complete and it will be made a permanent pillar of the UK's foreign policy. We reject the notion that the 'tilt' has been "achieved" from a Defence perspective. With only a modest presence compared to allies, little to no fighting force in the region, and little by way of regular activity; Defence's tilt to the Indo-Pacific is far from being achieved. Fundamentally UK Defence is already under-resourced for its role within NATO in the Euro-Atlantic, which is the core current and medium-term security challenge for the UK and Europe. If we aspire to play any significant role in the Indo-Pacific this would need a major commitment of cash, equipment, and personnel. Without this, the UK may need to curb its ambitions in the region. (Paragraph 96)

The Government notes the Committee's criticism of Defence's tilt to the region.

The Indo-Pacific tilt set out in the 2021 Integrated Review was a clear demonstration of the full spectrum of the UK's diverse interests in the region. Defence's objectives for the tilt spanned far beyond increasing our military presence in the region. Rather, as the then Defence Secretary reiterated in his speech at the Shangri La Dialogue Singapore in June 2023, our approach to the region revolves around a "partnership principle". We committed to creating new partnerships in the region, tapping into historic, deep relationships to integrate ourselves into the region, and our expanded Global Defence Network is supporting deeper engagement.

Defence has met the ambitions set out in the Integrated Review 2021. The UK is now more closely integrated into the Indo-Pacific, whether as an ASEAN Dialogue Partner or as a member of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Our landmark AUKUS partnership, our Hiroshima Accord with Japan announced in May 2023, and our bids to join ASEAN's Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and its Regional Forum (ARF) are all clear demonstrations of our long-term commitment to security and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

We have also delivered on our commitment to provide a persistent presence across all domains in the region, from the permanent forward deployment of HMS SPEY and HMS TAMAR to the enhanced engagement by Royal Air Force aircraft and personnel in exercises such as Exercise PITCH BLACK in Australia. In the Land domain, we are exploiting the forward presence of the Brunei Garrison to exercise with partners and delivery capability building, including jungle training and humanitarian and disaster relief.

The 2023 Integrated Review Refresh committed the Government to place its contribution in the Indo Pacific on a long-term strategic footing. Defence has an important role to play in that, building on our achievements to date. The commitment to return the Carrier Strike Group to the region in 2025 is just one example of how we will do so.