

# Post-Brexit UK Presence in the Indo-Pacific Region

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**Abstract:** *China's economic, political, and military expansion into the Indo - Pacific region (IPR) has been facing growing resistance from a range of countries including the US, India, Japan, and Australia. The region has become a significant geopolitical strategic focus of the world. The UK, among others, is actively adjusting its strategic outlook and building specific policies for IPR. In the context of the Covid-19 epidemic, the Russia - Ukraine conflict, and the global economic downturn, the post-Brexit UK (since 2020) has been forced to reconsider certain aspects of its domestic and foreign policies following the world's drastic changes which include the growing importance of IPR. This article focuses on the UK's interests, perspectives, and strategies on the IPR, and its implementation, as well as assessing the impact of the UK's presence in the IPR and its future.*

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific Region, The UK, Brexit, Global Britain

## 1. Background

The Indo-Pacific area (IPR) (including both insular and land areas) has become a geo-economic, geo-political and geo-strategic hotspot of the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> IPR spreads across the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia to China and Northeast Asian countries such as Japan and Korea. Its geography features consist of continents, peninsulas and archipelagos. Waterways of the IPR covers most of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which, together with the vast system of interior seas and bays, form important linkages for the global economy. The Indo-Pacific region currently accounts for nearly 50% of global economic output and over 50% of the world's population, including the world's two most populous countries, China and India; the world's

IPR is home to the largest economic and military powers in the world, including the US, China, Japan, India. With historical and new security issues threatening peace and security, the region has also become arena of competition, where several large, medium and small countries alike have tried to adjust their policies towards. The region's strategic advantages have led to the creation of new institutions and initiatives aimed at cooperation or mutual restraint

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second and third largest economies, China and Japan; the world's largest democracy - India; and two places with the largest concentration of Muslim people in the world, India and Indonesia.

among actors in the multi-polar order, including the vision of IPR connectivity of some European - Asian countries. In March 2021, the United Kingdom (UK) announced a comprehensive articulation of its national security and foreign policy, “Global Britain in a competitive age: the integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy”, vision 2030.

The document includes new foreign policy approaches towards the IPR, with the expectation that the country will play a more active role in maintaining the international order and utilize every tool to shape a more open international order and support democracies (HM Government, 2021).

Considering the UK context, the situation in the European region and the world, the UK’s interests and strategic goals for IPR are developed based on economic, political - security and values-based interests. The country strives towards an increasing presence at IPR, which will leave a significant impact on international and regional relations.

## **2. The UK’s motivation and interests in the Indo-Pacific region**

### ***2.1. On geopolitics and security***

IPR is a maritime hub of the world, connecting the Indian Ocean with Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, all the way to the East China Sea and the South Pacific. From a security perspective, many big powers use the IPR waters as a space to exercise domination, assert maximum control within and beyond the confines of the region, as well as use IPR to balance out other powers. The focus

of UK security interests is to maintain freedom of navigation in an area of increasing geopolitical competition and heated flashpoints. For the UK, the IPR with escalating competition among world powers does not mean a return to Cold War-style blocs. Instead, the influence of middle powers is likely to grow in the 2020s, especially as they take coordinated action.

In this context, IPR will become increasingly important both in geopolitical and economic terms, with many regional powers imposing considerable influence and power both individually and jointly. Thus, the UK will engage more deeply in the IPR to foster common prosperity and regional stability, forming stronger diplomatic and trade relationships. This approach acknowledges the importance of regional powers such as China, India, and Japan, as well as other countries including South Korea and some ASEAN nations. It will seek closer ties with existing regional institutions such as ASEAN and seek accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (See: HM Government, 2021: 22). On the other hand, the IPR is also at the heart of old and new highly-contested hotspots, at the same time that the UK’s economic interest in Asia relies on shipping routes which cross through a series of IPR bottlenecks (See: HM Government, 2021: 65). The freedom of navigation is therefore very crucial to the UK’s national interests.

### ***2.2. Economic interests***

The UK sees the IPR as the driver of global economic growth. According to the

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), IPR is the world's growth engine which accounts for nearly 50% of global GDP and hosts 50% of the world's population. It has some of the fastest growing economies that are leading new global trade agreements, pioneering technological and digital innovation and standards, and investing heavily in renewable energy as well as green technology. Accounting for 17.5% of UK trade and 10% of the UK's global FDI (Reference: HM Government, 2021: 65), the IPR is an important venue for the UK to forge more partnerships. Furthermore, the IPR is home to at least 1.7 million British national<sup>1</sup>, a foundation for flourishing trade links.

### 2.3. Values

As a geopolitical concept, IPR underpins the current legal and security order as a guarantee of regional stability and prosperity. Therefore, IPR embodies the value and soft power that the UK needs to pursue. The UK expands its partnerships to promote open societies and uphold the international rules and standards that champion free trade, security and stability. Through soft power, the UK will use economic levers (especially ODA) to reduce poverty, improve education and tackle climate change on the basis of

bilateral and multilateral cooperation with other countries in the IPR.

With these strategic interests in mind, the UK's aim is to increase its overarching and integrated presence in the IPR, as well as to establish its long-term commitments to forming closer and deeper bilateral and multilateral partnerships.

### 3. The UK's views and strategies in the Indo-Pacific region

The UK has engaged in the IPR for centuries and has established presence in most countries in the region. However, during the previous five centuries (16<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries), the UK did not publicly pronounce its role in the IPR, nor did it articulate its goals and how it would engage with countries in the region (See: Harper and associates, 2020). But in recent years, as more countries in the IPR emerged and started to play important political and economic roles both in the region and the world, the UK has also stepped up its engagement in the IPR, especially with key countries such as China, Japan, India. Brexit has further created new pressures for the UK to strengthen ties with the rest of the world under the agenda "Global Britain". The UK Government recognizes IPR will have a great impact on the UK's post-Brexit strategies, as well as on its global security and economic outlook.

Considering the benefits and importance of IPR to the UK, and with the country's position as a leading world power, the UK has an important role to play in the IPR. Increased trade between the UK, the sixth largest economy in the world, and countries in the IPR will contribute to overall economic growth. The UK can also

<sup>1</sup> The number of British people in IPR is nearly 1.7 million people and is concentrated mainly in Australia (1.2 million), South Korea (8,000), Taiwan (2,398), Japan (17,943), Malaysia (16,000), Singapore (50,000), New Zealand (217,000), Philippines (10,000), Hong Kong (33,733), Thailand (55,000), India (36,000), China (36,000) and Indonesia (11,000) (See: Harper et al., 2020: 20).

form dialogues with countries in the region to uphold democratic values and support the multinational institutions that have developed in recent years.

The report “Global Britain in the Age of Competition: A Comprehensive Report on Defense, Security, Development and Foreign Policy” was released on March 16, 2021 (See: HM Government, 2021). What stands out from this document is the “pivot” towards IPR, highlighting the following: the UK foreign and security policy are shifting to the IPR; the US is the most important strategic ally; Russia is the most immediate threat to the UK; China, India and Japan are considered the three most important powers in the IPR with very different characteristics and relationships with the UK; and climate change will be the UK’s top international priority for the next decade.

As such, the IPR is relevant to how the UK approaches its engagement with the region. Shaped by those principles and interests, the UK’s position in the IPR plays a role in promoting Britain’s strengths as a maritime power and a champion of international norms and standards (rules-based order), which underpin today’s global connectivity and prosperity. The UK’s growing involvement in world politics is welcomed by many countries, and the UK’s national interests are also in line with the expectations and goals of close allies in the region. These interests focus on maintaining stability in maritime areas through respecting the rule of law and preventing the erosion of the international order to support global trade and prosperity (See: Harper et al., 2020: 17).

On the other hand, in the post-Brexit world, the UK has to shift its strategic priorities to IPR as it reassess its international position. Thereby, the UK will implement and strengthen the above-mentioned interests in the long and sustainable term. In the IPR, maritime connectivity and cooperation mechanisms between the UK and other countries remain a central pillar of prosperity and interdependence. But nowadays, connectivity also has a digital dimension - one that links the maritime landscape with future growth through technology and telecommunications. Concepts currently used in maritime stability must now be integrated with new domains, especially cyberspace, which have now become a playground for great power competition. Therefore, the UK concept of IPR should ensure that new areas of competition do not undermine openness and inclusiveness, which are essential for free exchange and the rule of law (See: Harper et al., 2020: 17).

#### **4. The UK’s implementation of strategic initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region**

##### ***4.1. Politics and diplomacy***

In recent years, British diplomacy in the IPR has been demonstrated through strong diplomatic commitments to countries in the IPR.

Firstly, the UK has increased its contribution to multi-layered strategic dialogue mechanisms by actively participating in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among India, Australia, Japan and the US; joining in dialogues with ASEAN at the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF); as well as participating in

the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum.

Secondly, the UK has increased its political and diplomatic commitments by increasing high-level visits to IPR countries. In particular, it is also promoting diplomatic relations with countries in the Commonwealth. It is estimated that by 2050, six of the world's top 30 economies will be members of the Commonwealth bloc (See: PwC, 2017). The UK has also been in IPR for five centuries and many countries in the Commonwealth have adopted the British political model; hence, in the context of IPR, Commonwealth countries play a central role in the UK's foreign strategy. Over the years, the UK has remarkably amplified its engagement in the South Pacific. Recently, two British High Commissioners have been established in Tonga and Samoa. The UK has also strengthened participation in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and reinforced partnerships with Australia and New Zealand, two countries with significant influence, access, and interests in the region. In early 2020, UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab visited a range of IPR countries such as Australia, Singapore, Malaysia and Japan. The UK also seeks to enhance its partnership with South Korea and India on economic, military, security, and defense. Although lower on the UK's list of priorities, small Oceania countries have rapidly grown in importance in the UK's geostrategy. This is a region where the UK already has a significant foothold, especially in countries like Vanuatu, Samoa, or Fiji, where China is actively intensifying economic, political,

and military engagement. Some of these island nations are facing devastating environmental disasters due to rising sea levels and deterioration of marine ecosystems. The UK, as a global leader in combating climate change, shows its readiness to assist through foreign aid sources as well as promotes UK models of environmental protection. One example is "the Green Belt Programme" which aims to strengthen marine protection and sustainable management of operations in UK overseas territories.

#### **4.2. Economic activities**

The new era of British participation in the IPR is a strategic outcome of trade and economy. A core element of the UK's "Global Britain" project is its ambition to ensure free trade agreements (FTAs) will cover 80% of UK trade in three years (2022-2024); this includes trade with the United States (See: Truss, 2020). The most important area for UK trade expansion after Brexit is the IPR, which accounts for almost 50% of total global economic output, and successful FTA negotiations is also a strategic geopolitical move. The UK provides a large market for exporters across Asia and in particular the IPR. FTA negotiations in recent years have substantiated the UK's presence with the IPR. The UK has signed FTAs with Australia, New Zealand and Japan and is expected to join the CPTPP (the world's third largest free trade area). In addition, the UK and India have signed an agreement on an Enhanced Trade Partnership, which will serve as a springboard for a comprehensive and well-balanced trade agreement, setting out a 10-year "roadmap to 2030" for bilateral

relations between the two countries. The UK has also accelerated the progress of FT<sup>1</sup> negotiations with India. In Southeast Asia, the UK has promoted its relationship with ASEAN as an association taking a key role within the IPR. The UK appointed an Ambassador to ASEAN in 2019; became a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN on August 4, 2021; and signed trade agreements with Singapore (December 10, 2020) and Vietnam (December 29, 2020). These initiatives create more opportunities for British businesses to engage in economic cooperation, trade and investment in this region. The UK's increased cooperation with ASEAN and its member states will also create opportunities to jointly solve common challenges related to the South China Sea issue, partner to combat the Covid-19 pandemic and respond to the impacts of climate change. At the same time, the UK also amplifies its support for ASEAN's central role in promoting stability, prosperity and sustainable development in Southeast Asia.

The recently concluded Japan-UK trade agreement includes the most comprehensive and advanced digital provisions in the world. On that basis, the UK will have the experience to build and develop digital commerce with countries in the IPR and build an IPR community to protect data commerce. This will spur further innovative approaches between the UK and IPR allies such as Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, India, South Korea or

Canada and create a global impact on data governance and the Internet. For instance, both the CPTPP and the Digital Economic Partnership Agreement (DEPA) established by New Zealand, Chile and Singapore, are pioneering in setting rules for digital trade, further showcasing the importance of the IPR region as a forum for global rule-setting (See: Harper et al., 2020: 32).

As one of the world's leaders in financial technology (fintech), the UK stands ready to support the development, adoption and expansion of fintech innovations in IPR countries to combat against the entry of new competitors led by China-backed tech giants. The UK has signed FinTech Bridge agreements (a bilateral agreement between the governments of two countries and relevant regulators to encourage the development of financial technology) with several IPR countries, such as Australia, Singapore and South Korea (See: Harper et al., 2020: 35). At the same time, the UK is also working with information technology powers such as Canada, Japan, Singapore, India, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand to ensure the most transparent financial technology systems are developed and well-disseminated to improve accountability throughout the IPR's financial network.

More recently, the UK has played a key role in forming an international consensus on globally common principles and standards that guide the development of emerging technology. Given the pace of technological, economic and geopolitical developments, the UK has made positive strides in this regard. Following recent successful trade deals with Japan, the UK

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<sup>1</sup> The UK Government estimates that the FTA with India could raise UK GDP from 3.3 billion pounds to 6.2 billion pounds in 2035 (an increase of 0.12-0.22%) (Minh Hop, 2022).

has launched new multilateral dialogues with Japan, South Korea, Canada, Australia, Singapore and New Zealand on setting industry standards, especially in the field of information storage and cross-border digital traffic processing. In June 2020, the UK launched the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence to oversee the “responsible” development of artificial intelligence, with IPR countries including Australia, Canada, Japan, India, New Zealand, South Korea and Singapore. The UK Science and Innovation Network has more than 100 offices in 47 countries, including Australia, Japan, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan. These activities show that the UK has the advantages to lead the legal-diplomatic efforts for extensive research collaboration with countries in the IPR.

### ***4.3. Peace and security***

In recent years, the UK has been actively strengthening defense and security cooperation, including in maintaining maritime security, building overseas military bases and making other security contributions in the region. In April 2018, the UK opened a naval support base in Bahrain, its first permanent base in the Western Indian Ocean region since the British armed forces withdrew from the East of Suez in the 1970s. To date, Britain currently has 7 permanent sites in the Indian Ocean region: Bahrain, Oman, Kenya, Brunei, Singapore, Diego Garcia and Qatar (See: Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, 2021). The British Navy has a longstanding presence in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean region through Operation Kipion. Naval visits and defense

diplomacy across the IPR have increased since 2019 (See: HM Government, 2021:67). The British military, especially the Royal Navy, has enlarged its presence in the waters of the IPR. The UK has also extended its participation and cooperation with member partners of the Five Power Defense Agreement (Singapore, Malaysia, New Zealand and Australia), as well as with the ASEAN regional security groups and the Pacific Island Forum. Notably, from the end of May to December 2021, the Carrier Strike Group 21 (CSG21) led by HMS Queen Elizabeth has traveled to India, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and the wider regions, representing a pivot to IPR in British foreign policy. CSG21 travelled more than 26,000 nautical miles from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, from the Gulf of Aden to the Arabian Sea, and from the Indian Ocean to the Philippine Sea.

In recent years, the UK has made concerted efforts with the US to share and cooperate on security issues - which the US had been less involved - and form a stronger US-UK partnership to ensure stability across the IPR region. In addition, the UK has also built broad and effective alliances with other key allies and partners to address key regional issues. For example, it participates in the “Five Eyes” alliance (including Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and the United States) and cooperates with countries such as Germany and Japan to form an international front against China’s influence activities abroad. The UK has also elevated its defense and security ties with Australia in recent years through both FPDA and the Five Eyes.

Annual meetings between Australian and British foreign and defense ministers are organized to consult on strategic issues. The UK and Canada also work together to realize common values and strategic interests in both the Atlantic and Pacific regions. Both countries are members of the G7, the intelligence alliance, NATO and the Commonwealth. With Japan, the UK considers this country its closest security partner in Asia, as the two countries have a history of cooperation in counter-piracy operations in the Western Indian Ocean region and relief operations for regional and global disasters. In addition, both sides have begun high-tech defense industry cooperation; the British Royal Navy and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force have also enhanced joint cooperation with the US navy.

Since 2020, the UK has had growing demand in pursuing markets in different regions and continents in the world, at the same time building influence and promoting a global political role, especially in the IPR. Beyond using bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements, it also embarks on partnership agreements in security, military and defense.

For instance, the UK has formed a tripartite defense agreement (AUKUS) with the US and Australia, and other bilateral agreements such as with India. It has also collaborated with the CANZUK-J-I<sup>1</sup> group to launch extensive cooperation initiatives

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<sup>1</sup> The CANZUK-J-I alliance consists of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the UK, Japan and India. It includes four of the “Five Eyes” members, three of those with the strongest military capacity in IPR (Japan, India and Australia), as well as IPR’s longest-lasting and largest democracies.

and seek solutions on security cooperation across the region. In addition, the UK also maintains efforts in its priority partners in the IPR (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Japan and India, along with South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Sri Lanka), while developing flexible and open cooperation with emerging and strategically important partners (such as Vietnam, Thailand and the Philippines), all of which play important geopolitical roles in the IPR. In addition, the UK’s participation in the IPR is also reflected in initiatives such as the “Prosperity Agenda”, which focuses on trade, economic and technological issues. There is also the Security Agenda”, which is broadly defined to strengthen regional security and the resilience of domestic socio-political institutions in the most vulnerable countries in the IPR, including supporting regional strategic balance and addressing information warfare, cyber threats or new concerns about biological weapons and medical security.

The UK has also boosted ties with India by strengthening bilateral defense cooperation and bolstering maritime security. During British Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s visit to India on April 26, 2021 (his first major international visit after Brexit), both sides adopted four main pillars of cooperation, including health, trade and investment, defense and security and climate change (See: Rahul Roy- Chaudhury, 2021). Subsequently, during Boris Johnson’s official visit to India from April 21-22, 2022, both sides emphasized defense and security cooperation as a key element in India-UK relations. India and the UK agreed to work closely to maintain a free

and secure IPR. At the end of the visit, two countries issued a Joint Statement and signed four memorandums of understanding on cooperation in education, energy, technology and space (See: Dung Hoang, 2022).

In addition to implementing the above initiatives, in response to climate change, the UK has supported the transition to clean, resilient and sustainable growth in the Indian Ocean which is directly related to its broader COP26 strategy. The country has also carried out positive programs that promote an open society and protect trade and commerce, such as preventing conflicts; upholding the rule of law, respect for human rights and freedom of the media; promoting education for children and humanitarian aid. The UK also uses ODA to help partner countries in the region combat extreme poverty, shifting the provision of grants to providing expertise and capacity-building.

### **5. Assessing the impact of the UK's presence in the Indo-Pacific region**

With the new approach to IPR, the UK will have the opportunity to increase its participation in the region and build a stronger, more open and more engaged strategy with countries in the IPR. At the same time, it can also consult and coordinate with allies (US, Japan, India, Australia) to share security burden and support one another to solve common problems in the region, which will further help the UK enhance its reputation. The challenge, however, is that the UK must make and deliver effective and tenable commitments to the region, recognize the United States as the a leading player

in the region, and avoid being overly ambitious so as not to cause conflict with other countries. The unique capabilities that the UK brings to this region are often those that IPR countries or even the US lack, have limited experience in, or have inefficiently implemented; these include intellectual property rights, digitalization, technology cooperation, sustainable development, response to climate change and environmental protection. Another key challenge is securing sufficient funding for policies and plans for the new “Global Britain” in the IPR and partnerships with countries in the region such as Japan, India, etc.

However, the UK's goal of becoming the most integrated and well-represented European partner in the region within the next nine years seems too ambitious. The UK has so far outlined only a “framework” for its “inclination” towards IPR and has yet to define the region geographically, while European countries such as France, Germany and the Netherlands have already put in place well-articulated policies towards the IPR. In addition, Britain has yet to develop a permanent naval presence in the Indian Ocean region, while France (among European nations) already has the most significant presence in the region with a high number of naval and military cooperation activities. For example, it was France that led the first Quad + 1 naval exercise (named exercise La Perouse, April 5-7, 2021) in the Bay of Bengal along with the US, India, Australia and Japan.

In the current rapidly changing global and regional contexts, especially with major

events such as the escalating US-China and US-Russia competition, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the UK's activities in the IPR in recent years, especially over the past year, are still modest compared to European countries such as France, Germany, not to mention the US, Japan, India, and Australia. The UK's approach to IPR needs to be more holistic and focuses on stronger cooperation with major countries in the region.

Short-term defense commitments reflect UK priorities as aligned with Quad members' vision for the IPR. However, the UK comes short of developing a strong partnership with countries in the region, or facilitating capacity building and knowledge exchange, which do not meet demands from regional countries, including major powers. Most importantly, too much focus on the defense sector risks obscuring larger goals, such as improving diplomatic relations and development cooperation with countries and institutions to solve common problems arising in the region. Notably, the UK still puts ASEAN as a lower priority than the Taiwan Strait, Hong Kong and islands in the Pacific (See: Edwards et al., 2022).

Maritime security is an important area in the IPR, but the UK is lagging behind. Based on what has been done, it looks on the surface that the UK is moderately active in this area. However, maritime security should not only focus on deploying maritime forces or holding joint exercises; maritime security should be viewed from a broader perspective, concentrating on the maritime domain and security environment issues such as cooperation to combat

piracy, illegal fishing in marine protected areas, or human trafficking at sea.

## **6. Conclusion**

As the strategic importance of IPR emerges in economic, political and security terms, nations around the world will continue to develop policies to strengthen their reach in the region. Although long-lasting partnerships have been formed in the IPR, several countries, including the UK, have implemented new advances in foreign policies to respond to new dynamics, such as China's economic, political and military expansion. In the coming decades, the IPR will concentrate some of the most pressing global challenges across climate change, biodiversity, maritime security, geopolitical competition, as well as international rules and norms. Therefore, the role and strategic position of IPR will continue to grow, bringing both opportunities and challenges to countries inside and outside the region. In the twenty-first century, IPR becomes a region where two oceans share a common identity and where a new era of global cooperation unfolds. Stability and prosperity in this region can only be guaranteed when all countries work together, share common goals, and enjoy the fruits of common efforts. The UK is aware of the importance of this matter. The UK's strategic aim in the IPR is driven primarily by its national interest as the IPR becomes ever more important to Britain from a geopolitical and geo-economic point of view. As such, the UK will continue to engage with its allies to realize its strategy in the region and enhance its international status □

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