

From Benign Neglect to Effective Re-engagement? Assessing British Strategizing and Policies Towards Southeast Asia Since 2010

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Against the backdrop of debates about the UK's ability to design and implement grand strategy or effective regional strategies, this article examines the nature, coherence and effectiveness of Britain's recent re-engagement with Southeast Asia. The article makes three main arguments. First, British re-engagement vis-à-vis Southeast Asia has been multi-dimensional in character with an emphasis on defence and economic diplomacy, alongside efforts to achieve a separate new dialogue partnership with ASEAN. Second, the recent notable increase in the Royal Navy's presence in Southeast Asia and the surrounding region not only reflects the "Global Britain" narrative of Conservative

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Party policymakers, but also builds on more longstanding security and alliance considerations and institutional support that preceded the June 2016 Brexit referendum. Third, while British strategizing and policies may in the longer term yield the outcomes the UK wants, the effectiveness of the country's re-engagement for now is to some extent in question. In particular, UK policymakers and officials continue to struggle in taking forward and convincingly communicating an integrated and aligned strategy vis-à-vis Southeast Asia that is embedded in a wider regional approach.

Keywords: Brexit, Global Britain, All of Asia policy, UK-Southeast Asia relations, British foreign policy, national security strategy.

In April 2012 in Malaysia, Prime Minister David Cameron raised a toast to a new chapter in UK-Southeast Asian relations, declaring “the era of benign neglect is over”.¹ Since then, British efforts to re-engage individual countries in Southeast Asia diplomatically, militarily and economically have maintained considerable momentum. This momentum accelerated further following the referendum on 23 June 2016 on Britain’s membership in the European Union (EU) in which 51.9 per cent of those who voted opted to leave. With Brexit on the horizon, Britain has also sought to develop a new partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).² Having enunciated a narrative of “Global Britain” and an “All of Asia” policy,³ while policymakers have on different occasions also embraced the Indo-Pacific concept, the most head-turning aspects of Britain’s recent re-engagement with Southeast Asia, and the wider region, have arguably been the Royal Navy’s near continuous presence in the Asia Pacific in 2018, and the then Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson’s stated interest in further reinforcing Britain’s naval return to “East of Suez”.⁴ The UK’s re-engagement with Southeast Asia comes at a time when increasing geopolitical and economic competition has encouraged debate in both Britain and Southeast Asia about what the UK may (or may not) bring to the region.⁵

The purpose of this article is to examine current UK strategizing and policies towards Southeast Asia. Notably, the UK is not well known in the contemporary period for “doing” grand strategy or even designing and implementing effective regional strategies.⁶ Is Southeast Asia an exception to the rule? How does London approach this important subregion of the Asia Pacific in the current geopolitical and economic context? Drawing on primary sources and interviews in London and Southeast Asia, this article seeks to enhance the

otherwise quite limited literature on the UK's recent re-engagement with Southeast Asia.⁷ The article assesses the nature, coherence and effectiveness of Britain's re-engagement with Southeast Asia, not least in the wake of recent efforts to strengthen cross-government approaches.

The article is divided into four sections. To develop the context and framework, the first section sets out some general insights from debates concerning British grand strategy and regional strategizing. Considering the UK government's strategic objectives and related conceptual linkages, the second section outlines Britain's increasing interactions with Southeast Asia under successive Conservative-led governments to illustrate the nature of its re-engagement with the region. In the third section, we account for the drivers of Britain's increasing defence and economic engagement with Southeast Asia over the past decade. Finally, we identify some limitations of British strategizing towards the region.

The article makes three main arguments. First, British re-engagement vis-à-vis Southeast Asia has been multi-dimensional in character, involving multiple government departments. It has especially, but not exclusively, focused on defence and economic diplomacy, alongside recent efforts to strengthen the relationship with ASEAN with a view to securing a separate dialogue partnership with the grouping post-Brexit. Second, the notable increase in the Royal Navy's presence not only reflects the ambitions of Conservative Party policymakers keen to promote "Global Britain", but also builds on security and alliance considerations as well as institutional support that precede the Brexit referendum. Third, the effectiveness of the UK's re-engagement with Southeast Asia to some extent remains in question in part because some of the government's policies have been met with ambivalence or resistance, and because policymakers continue to struggle clarifying and clearly communicating how UK strategizing and policies towards Southeast Asia are aligned with Britain's wider regional approach.

Context and Framework

Why is the question of whether the UK has pursued a coherent and effective approach towards Southeast Asia of intellectual interest and practical import? We suggest that it is because of the considerable debate over the UK's ability to adopt a grand strategy (or even only an effective regional strategy) in the context of contemporary security challenges, core national objectives and resource constraints. Former

practitioners argue that even by 2015, UK policymakers were not necessarily conceptualizing strategy appropriately, leading them to conflate aspirations and policy with strategy. Also, Whitehall was struggling to respond to cross-departmental challenges and approaches in the absence of a unifying methodology to think strategically.⁸ Similar criticisms among analysts claim that Britain is ill-equipped to conceptualize and execute grand strategy. Patrick Porter argues that the UK has been inclined to follow the guiding ideas of US national security strategies rather than develop its own.⁹ Jamie Gaskarth suggests that UK policymakers adopt only a piecemeal and technocratic approach to defence and security, while failing to spell out policy objectives for contemporary Britain.¹⁰ Significantly, both Porter and Gaskarth see British identity as unsettled, with the latter chiding the government for failing to conduct an adequate assessment of Britain's place in the world as understood by the domestic political community.¹¹ However, other scholars disagree. They maintain that Britain might be seen as pursuing a grand strategy aimed at upholding the "liberal international order" through its alliance with the United States and its commitment to democracy, free markets, multilateral institutions and international law.¹² Yet others believe that a coherent and effective UK approach to policymaking has been possible even in the absence of a strategy deserving of that name.¹³

Much of this debate has occurred with reference to the *Strategic Defence and Security Review* (SDSR) of 2010 and 2015, and the *National Security Capabilities Review* (NSCR) of 2018, which is the most recent strategy document to again set out the UK's national security context and its security approach but does so against the backdrop of the adoption of the vision and values of "Global Britain" as an important marker of identity and ambition.¹⁴ These important government documents have themselves drawn criticism. While the 2010 SDSR was heavily faulted as an exercise in cost-cutting,¹⁵ the 2015 SDSR was criticized for its failure to identify strategic risks and take account of an international environment increasingly characterized by Great Power competition.¹⁶ Even the NSCR raised questions, including regarding the main security challenges facing the UK and the need to strengthen the capabilities of the country's armed forces.¹⁷ Regardless, these documents testify to Britain's efforts that have been invested to develop joined-up and comprehensive approaches to security and prosperity. These have given rise to the Fusion Doctrine which is designed to create cross-government responses to security challenges and which focuses on strategy-building in the context of a range of objectives as well as situational assessments.¹⁸

The doctrine identifies three main security referents: the security of the UK population; the UK's influence around the world; and the country's prosperity.¹⁹ Notably, existing assessments of the reforms introduced to improve UK strategizing and national security making are broadly positive. Indeed, it is argued that the National Security Council (NSC) and the formulation of the SDSR have enabled the design of a more coherent national security strategy through "networks of regularised, embedded, and often strategically decisive" interdepartmental coordination meetings.²⁰ Furthermore, Britain has subsumed the "GREAT Britain" brand and soft power strategies under its national security framework, yielding a "multimodal diplomatic toolset" to pursue state and private sector interests simultaneously while British security is predicated on a strong economy.²¹

Even as assessments of whether Britain can "do" strategy in general are becoming more positive, concerns about Britain's approaches to various regions of the world persist. For Porter, the abandonment of geography in UK strategy-building, combined with "the inception of more unbounded ideas, such as 'values', have de-territorialised Britain's understanding of its interests to the point of incoherence".²² Also, the limited literature on the UK's actual approaches towards specific regions suggests that Britain has struggled to develop coherent and/or effective regional strategies. For instance, the British government's response to the Arab Spring in the early 2010s shows how the UK's then "networked foreign policy" was implemented on a bilateral basis that lacked coordination even as security priorities, more than economic or social pressures, shaped British policy towards the Middle East.²³ With regard to Britain's approach towards Africa, the "Global Britain" discourse embraced by then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson resonated in problematic ways with the imperial and conservative discourse of civilizing and modernizing Africa, while the UK's trade and investment plans were not clearly articulated.²⁴ Similarly, Britain's regional approach towards Latin America has been characterized by its failure to manage local political sensitivities and to allocate resources necessary to deliver on rhetoric and ideas.²⁵

Appreciating that the meaning of strategy has shifted substantially over time,²⁶ this article will associate with a strategic approach or strategizing more than simply the enunciation of particular slogans, aspirations or specific policies. In relation to a region, such an approach would involve linking core national objectives to a framework that formulates overarching strategic goals vis-à-vis that region, while taking account of the domestic and various local

contexts and choosing among available relevant means to achieve these goals.

An Explicit Southeast Asia Strategy?

Post-colonial relations between the UK and parts of Southeast Asia remained substantial following Britain's retreat "East of Suez", especially in terms of connections with former colonies, in part through the Commonwealth and the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), of which the UK is a founding member alongside Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand.²⁷ Beyond these institutional links, Britain maintains a residual military presence in Southeast Asia through a Gurkha garrison and jungle warfare training facilities in Brunei and the British Defence Singapore Support Unit (BDSSU) which provides the Royal Navy with access to the Sembawang Naval Wharves and supplies fuel to foreign warships on request, most notably the US Seventh Fleet. Singapore-UK ties in particular have been underpinned by the substantial corporate presence of British private sector companies. The UK has also served as a major provider of education with over 130,000 Southeast Asian students pursuing a British higher education qualification in 2016–17.²⁸

Notwithstanding these historical connections and roles, in the contemporary period, the UK has not spelled out a dedicated strategy for its relations with Southeast Asia. Indeed, one could argue that up to and including the years of New Labour (1997–2010), Britain's focus on Southeast Asia was effectively dwarfed by the increasing attention given to the rise of China and India.²⁹ Only under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition (2010–15) did Britain seek to shift its "diplomatic weight to the East" by strengthening relations with the emerging economies of Southeast Asia.³⁰ In more recent years, Southeast Asia has been subsumed under a so-called "All of Asia" policy.³¹ This policy identifies three UK priorities—values, prosperity and security—while advancing arguments intended to demonstrate Britain's relevance to regional states and possible areas for future cooperation.³² Significantly though, the "All of Asia" policy is silent on how Britain understands its relations with the different subregions of the continent such as Southeast Asia. Furthermore, despite the thematic focus of the UK's strategic priorities, the policy offers few further insights. This, however, does not imply that Southeast Asia has no place in UK strategic thinking. As one would expect, there are connections between the goals enumerated in the "All of Asia" policy and the key UK national security strategy documents.

In general terms, these goals focus on the protection of Britain, its overseas territories and its citizens; the projection of British influence to protect and promote interests and values, especially in relation to the rules-based international order and in addressing conflict and building stability overseas; as well as promoting UK prosperity. Significantly, British government ministers also discuss Southeast Asia with reference to the “Indo-Pacific”, a concept which is increasingly invoked by policymakers and has found its way into statements and agreements with countries such as India and Japan. At the time of writing, government departments such as the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) were working on an Indo-Asia-Pacific strategy and Asia-Pacific strategy respectively in consultation with one another and other departments.

Britain’s strategic thinking about its relations with Southeast Asia has clearly evolved. There was only scant reference in the 2010 SDSR about how Southeast Asia fits in with the UK’s broader security interests and goals, with the document limiting itself to reiterating its support for ASEAN and signalling Britain’s interest in establishing a security dialogue with Indonesia.³³ However, the region featured more prominently in the UK’s 2014 *National Strategy for Maritime Security*, which listed the security of the waters stretching from the East and South China Seas through the Straits of Malacca and into the Indian Ocean as one of Britain’s five maritime security objectives.³⁴ Southeast Asia featured more substantially in the 2015 SDSR. The region was then associated with security risks linked to terrorism, extremism and instability, the resurgence of state-based threats via unresolved historical disputes, and the erosion of the rules-based international order, especially the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Specifically, the 2015 SDSR flagged British interest in helping Indonesia and Malaysia counter violent extremism. Southeast Asia was also specifically identified as a target for the UK to project its influence, with the SDSR stipulating an interest in promoting closer relationships with Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. The 2015 SDSR also noted Britain’s support for a future EU-ASEAN trade relationship based on country-by-country agreements.³⁵ The limited but important references to Southeast Asia in the 2015 SDSR were reinforced by the 2018 NSCR which also highlighted the importance of the FPDA. As noted, however, a more specific Southeast Asia strategy is still being worked out. Notwithstanding the absence of a more detailed strategy, Conservative-led governments have since 2010 re-engaged with Southeast Asia. So, what specifically has been the nature of this re-engagement?

Deepening Engagement Post-2010

Diplomacy

One of the first moves by the Coalition government to strengthen ties with Southeast Asia was the 2010 UK-Vietnam Strategic Partnership Declaration.³⁶ By 2012, the UK was already conducting more ministerial visits to ASEAN countries than in the previous twenty years. Foreign Secretary William Hague and Prime Minister David Cameron undertook tours of Southeast Asia to demonstrate that Britain was “looking East as never before”.³⁷ In April 2012, Cameron visited Indonesia and Malaysia, while Hague undertook tours of Vietnam, Singapore and Brunei. Both undertook historic visits to Myanmar within the same year to rebuild strained relations, while leading efforts to suspend and remove EU sanctions. The reopening of the British Embassy in Laos in 2012 also established Britain as the third EU country, after France and Germany, to have an embassy in every ASEAN member.³⁸ In 2015, Cameron visited Jakarta, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, while also becoming the first British prime minister to visit Vietnam. In more recent years, the UK has continued to reinforce relations with Southeast Asian states through further visits by government ministers and senior officials. During this period, among many other developments, the UK resumed a strategic dialogue with Thailand in 2012.³⁹ In 2019, several agreements to deepen bilateral partnerships have also been struck with individual ASEAN member states, including the “Partnership for the Future” with Singapore,⁴⁰ and agreements in the context of the 2nd Partnership Forum organized with Indonesia,⁴¹ and the 7th UK-Vietnam Strategic Dialogue.⁴²

The Coalition government also focused on deeper engagement with ASEAN. The UK acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 2012. With formal relations then structured through the platform of the ASEAN-EU Enhanced Partnership, Britain promoted regional integration, stability and security through its ASEAN Programme Fund, while encouraging greater multilateral engagement.⁴³ Since leaving the EU will result in Britain’s removal from the ASEAN-EU Strategic Partnership, Britain has redoubled its diplomatic outreach to ASEAN since the Brexit referendum. Having already applied to become an observer to two of the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) Expert Working Groups (EWGs), the UK is also aiming to become a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN. Specifically, Britain has been aiming for full dialogue partner status or a bespoke arrangement that would reflect the UK’s existing ties and roles in

Southeast Asia. Given that the UK did not, as originally planned, leave the EU at the end of March 2019, the planned submission of the UK's application has been pushed back.

Notably, success in convincing ASEAN members to agree to a future UK application for Dialogue Partner status has not been taken for granted in part because ASEAN has implemented a moratorium on the inclusion of further dialogue partners since 1999. That said, government ministers have used visits to Southeast Asia to underline Britain's embedded presence in the region, its contribution to regional security and its usefulness to ASEAN as a diplomatic and economic partner.⁴⁴ Indeed, the UK has not only sought to demonstrate its commitment to principles such as ASEAN Centrality but also to clarify how it can add value to ASEAN cooperation and regional security, development and prosperity in the future. Former Minister of State for Asia and the Pacific, Mark Field, thus made clear to the ASEAN Secretary-General Lim Jock Hoi in August 2018 and again in January 2019 the UK's interest in future cooperation with ASEAN in FinTech and green finance, smart cities, cybersecurity, education and defence cooperation.⁴⁵ Other related steps taken have included the establishment of the British mission to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta.⁴⁶ Britain's commitment to develop an independent partnership with ASEAN was also underlined when newly-appointed Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab chose the opening ceremony of the annual ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting as the occasion of his first overseas visit in July 2019.⁴⁷ He used this opportunity to discuss economic issues, regional security challenges and identify opportunities to deepen cooperation with ASEAN to strengthen the rules-based international order.

Development and Stability

Under Conservative-led governments since 2010, the UK has also sought to make a strong contribution to sustainable development and stability in the region. Notably, there is a specific Southeast Asia component in the Department for International Development's (DFID) Asia Regional Programme which aims to improve infrastructure, access to markets, safe movement of people and management of natural resources.⁴⁸ In particular, Indonesia and Myanmar have country-focused programmes supported by DFID in-country offices. In Indonesia, DFID focuses on climate action and strengthening democratic institutions.⁴⁹ In Myanmar, DFID has a budget of £87.5 million (US\$105 million), making it the Department's largest country

programme in Southeast Asia.⁵⁰ Following the Rohingya crisis, DFID programmes in Myanmar are now tailored towards social cohesion and economic development along with support for refugees and displaced persons. However, the focus of DFID's engagement with Naypyidaw remains overwhelmingly on policy reform.⁵¹ The Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) complements this assistance, focusing on the peace process and security sector reform since the 2015 elections. A land monitoring programme in northern Rakhine State has also been undertaken along with conflict prevention through community capacity and youth leadership programmes.⁵²

Britain has also established a regional counter-terrorism unit based in Kuala Lumpur, which apparently also reports to the British Defence Staff Southeast Asia (BDS Southeast Asia) in Singapore, while FCO and British police are institutional partners of the Jakarta Centre for Law Enforcement Cooperation (JCLEC), which was established in 2004 to combat transnational crime and terrorism. British efforts to assist in peace and reconciliation efforts in Southeast Asia include the Mindanao Contact Group which enables politicians, negotiators, former combatants, military and police involved with the Northern Ireland peace process to share their experiences and provide information on devolution models in both Scotland and Northern Ireland.⁵³ British liaison officers are also embedded in the Changi Regional HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief) Coordination Centre (RHCC) to complement the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management.⁵⁴ On maritime security, British interest has focused on tackling piracy and sea robbery which has seen London support relevant multilateral efforts.⁵⁵

Defence Cooperation

Since 2010, Conservative leaders have consolidated and expanded the UK's defence diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Notwithstanding recent debates about the future of the FPDA,⁵⁶ during the 2010s the UK successfully maintained the arrangement's workings in the face of lapsing momentum despite considerable resource constraints in the wake of the 2008–9 Global Financial Crisis. Britain has also become a substantial exporter of arms to Southeast Asia, ranking fourth in the region in 2013–17.⁵⁷ In Singapore, BDS Southeast Asia acts as a focal point for coordinating engagement with British defence attachés in the region, and supporting regional partners

through security sector reform, conflict prevention and stabilization initiatives. At the bilateral level, Singapore and Britain updated their defence relationship by signing a Defence Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding in June 2018.⁵⁸ In November 2018, the inaugural Vietnam-UK Defence Policy Dialogue took place during which both parties evaluated their defence cooperation and signed a document on cooperation in the geospace field while discussing continued training in relation to UN peacekeeping missions, along with the UK facilitating exchanges with the country's defence industry.⁵⁹ The second dialogue, held in September 2019, centred on high-level delegation exchanges, military medicine, UN peacekeeping operations, young officer exchanges, hydrography and English language training.⁶⁰

One of the most conspicuous developments has been the increasing presence of the Royal Navy in Southeast Asia, alongside greater naval cooperation with regional states. To be sure, Britain has had a long record of deploying military assets to Southeast Asia, albeit primarily in the context of FPDA exercises. In keeping with the Coalition government's initial diplomatic embrace of Southeast Asia, it committed HMS *Richmond* for the FPDA exercise Bersama Shield 2011 and HMS *Daring* for the FPDA's Bersama Lima 2013.⁶¹ HMS *Daring* was later redeployed from Bersama Lima 2013 to provide humanitarian assistance alongside the helicopter carrier HMS *Illustrious* following Typhoon Haiyan. Outside of the FPDA, in 2014 the British submarine HMS *Tireless* and Royal Navy survey ship HMS *Echo* were deployed to assist in the search for missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370. Notably, this was followed by several years during which the Royal Navy did not deploy any ships to Southeast Asia due to operational requirements elsewhere and limited ship numbers.

However, a major shift in British maritime operations occurred in 2018 when the Royal Navy maintained a near-continuous naval presence in Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific region. HMS *Sutherland* helped enforce UN sanctions against North Korea and conducted combined naval exercises with Australia, Japan, South Korea and the United States.⁶² HMS *Albion*, an amphibious assault ship, joined HMS *Sutherland* to enforce these sanctions before participating in the first bilateral amphibious exercise with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), and conducted a US-style freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) around the disputed Paracel Islands in the South China Sea.⁶³ The FONOP was an expression of the UK's legal concerns over China's declared baselines around

the Paracels. Notably, HMS *Albion's* Special Purpose Task Group (SPTG) subsequently participated in a jungle training exercise in Brunei, before conducting the first Setia Kawan combined exercise with the Royal Brunei Armed Forces (RBAF) since 2009. The frigate HMS *Argyll* participated in Exercise Bersama Lima 2018.⁶⁴

Outside of these maritime operations, the Royal Navy has supported efforts to enhance the Vietnam Coast Guard's ability to monitor and police Vietnam's exclusive economic zone.⁶⁵ Defence engagement has also seen the British Army conduct jungle warfare exercises with Thailand in 2017 under Exercise Panther Gold.⁶⁶ In 2017, British Forces Brunei and the RBAF established the Regional Jungle Warfare Symposium (RJWS) which aims to develop Brunei as a centre of excellence in jungle warfare and to establish a platform for collaboration between participating countries including Australia, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and the United States.⁶⁷ Britain was also an observer at the annual US-Philippine Balikatan exercises in 2019.⁶⁸

At the end of 2018, then Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson declared that Britain would look to enhance its military presence in Southeast Asia.⁶⁹ Some observers suggested this could involve the deployment of an offshore patrol vessel, a frigate, or perhaps a future multi-role Littoral Strike Ship on a rotational basis under a US-style "places, not bases" arrangement, a model the UK has already employed in the Middle East since 2018.⁷⁰ In the event, such a rotational presence would most likely be based in Singapore given the Royal Navy's existing access.

Notwithstanding this greater focus on Southeast Asia in Britain's defence engagement, it is important to clarify that recent UK naval cooperation was mostly conducted with allies and close defence partners from outside Southeast Asia, such as France, Japan and the United States. Even before 2018, the UK had sought to increase interoperability with the French navy in its annual *Jeanne d'Arc* deployment to the Asia Pacific. In 2017, two Royal Navy helicopters and sixty Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel participated in the French deployment which called at Singapore, Sri Lanka, Japan, Guam, Australia and Vietnam. The task group also participated in the first *Forager Deux* and *Arc 17* exercises with America and Japan off the coast of Guam.⁷¹ In 2018, the Royal Navy contributed two helicopters and forty Royal Navy and Royal Marine troops to *Jeanne d'Arc*, participating in Indonesia's Komodo naval exercise with over forty nations.⁷² Britain has also undertaken several exercises alongside the US navy in the South China Sea. In early 2019, HMS *Argyll*

participated in a trilateral anti-submarine warfare drill with the US Seventh Fleet and JMSDF, followed by six days of coordinated drills with the USS *McCampbell* in the South China Sea.⁷³ In March, HMS *Montrose* engaged in another UK-Japan-US trilateral exercise that also focused on anti-submarine warfare. These collaborative efforts with France, the United States and Japan are in line with the stated objectives of the 2015 SDSR, which called for greater interoperability with key allies.⁷⁴ Also, the UK armed forces participated alongside defence force personnel, ships and aircraft from Australia, America, New Zealand, Japan and Canada for Exercise *Talisman Sabre 2019*.⁷⁵ In mid-August 2019, the destroyer HMS *Defender* was to have been deployed to the Asia Pacific but was then tasked to support the safe passage of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.⁷⁶

Democracy, Human Rights and Rule of Law

According to the 2015 SDSR, Britain's security and prosperity is dependent upon a rules-based international order that reflects the nation's core values, namely democracy, the rule of law, and the promotion of human rights, among others.⁷⁷ Even before the Coalition government followed New Labour into office, the UK had a strong record of advocating for democratic change and human rights in Southeast Asia, particularly in Myanmar. Previously couched explicitly in terms of a new ethical dimension of foreign policy, the Coalition government continued to commit to values such as freedom of expression, democracy and the rule of law. Having initially sought to maintain pressure on Myanmar, the Coalition responded constructively to political changes brought about by the Thein Sein presidency in 2011. The deep-rooted ethnic conflict and human rights violations in the borderlands nevertheless still preoccupied British officials in Yangon and London, and from 2012 the UK has been at the forefront of international diplomacy vis-à-vis Myanmar following deadly violence in Rakhine State. In response to the large-scale displacement and significant violence that occurred in Rakhine State in 2017, which prompted the UN's calls for an investigation into the Myanmar armed forces' chain of command "to determine their liability for genocide",⁷⁸ Britain at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has called for accountability on alleged crimes against humanity and for the return of Rohingya refugees under the principles established by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. While the British government has been vocal about developments in Rakhine State, it has, however, approached perceived failings in relation to

democracy and human rights in other Southeast Asian countries less forcibly. That said, the UK condemned Cambodia following the arrest and detention of opposition leader Kem Sokha amid wider moves by the Cambodian government to suppress civil society prior to the 2018 general election.⁷⁹ The UK government was also unequivocal in its opposition to the Sultan of Brunei's introduction of a new law that made certain sex offences including adultery and sodomy punishable by death.

Moreover, the FCO has undertaken regional initiatives to tackle human rights abuses and challenges, including funding research to help gather data on human trafficking in Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia and Thailand. Bilaterally, the FCO and British embassies focus on several programmes. In Cambodia, the UK has facilitated practical support and funding for the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia which has tried Khmer Rouge leaders. In Vietnam, the British Embassy has focused on supporting press freedom. In the Philippines, Britain works closely with partners to strengthen capacities for prosecuting offenders of child sexual exploitation. The British Embassy in Bangkok has supported the Thai lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community and local human rights defenders.⁸⁰ Britain has also offered £129 million (US\$155 million) to support Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.⁸¹ Other initiatives include projects to empower women on tackling violent extremism and supporting evidence-gathering on sexual violence in conflicts.

Promoting Joint Prosperity

Under successive Conservative governments, Britain's economic footprint across Southeast Asia has been supported by a cross-departmental approach to align strategic and private sector interests. In 2011, the UK launched a new strategy of commercial diplomacy to "rebalance" its recession-hit economy through international trade and investment, resulting in the creation of the FCO Business Charter and the UK Trade and Investment (UKTI) portfolio which identified India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore as target markets.⁸² The UK-ASEAN Business Council (UKABC) was established under UKTI's "Britain Open for Business" strategy in 2011, while trade missions led by Prime Minister Cameron and government ministers aimed to promote the UK as a leading economic partner, coupled with public encouragement for free trade agreements (FTAs) with the EU.⁸³ Between 2011 and 2013, UKTI sought to promote business opportunities in

Southeast Asia under its Asia Task Force. In 2012, Prime Minister Cameron appointed Richard Graham MP as trade envoy to Indonesia; in 2015 his mandate was extended to incorporate the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in order to highlight British expertise in key industries that could assist in ASEAN's development.⁸⁴ In 2015, the UK-Singapore Financial Dialogue was established to provide a springboard for British investment by identifying opportunities for collaboration across ASEAN on market access, cybersecurity, FinTech and infrastructure development.⁸⁵ New trade envoys for Southeast Asia were appointed in 2016, while finance specialists and other attachés are embedded in British embassies and consulates.⁸⁶ UK Export Finance (UKEF) has identified Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia as priority markets with the latter two having embedded UKEF representatives. In June 2018, Britain announced a new British Trade Commissioner for the Asia Pacific. Based in Singapore, the Commissioner is responsible for leading the UK's trade and investment promotion and policy work. For instance, in 2019 Singapore and Britain launched a "Partnership for the Future" which focuses on the digital economy, education and innovation.⁸⁷

Efforts to strengthen a favourable business environment at the bilateral level are also being undertaken. These efforts have been at the heart of endeavours to enhance the region's prosperity through the Cross-Government Prosperity Fund (CGPF). The CGPF aims to build economic resilience through economic reforms while supporting the UN Sustainable Development Goals and Britain's Aid Strategy.⁸⁸ The capacity building and technical assistance undertaken aim to reduce inequality, boost economic growth and encourage private sector investment to create business opportunities for British companies. In 2016–17, the CGPF committed £55 million (US\$66 million) in Official Development Assistance (ODA) and £5 million (US\$6 million) in non-ODA funds for projects across Southeast Asia.⁸⁹ The funding is targeted at financial and energy sector reforms, tackling corruption, and developing policy frameworks for intellectual property at both bilateral and multilateral levels via ASEAN.⁹⁰ Under the CGPF's current funding for 2018–22, £19 million (US\$23 million) has been allocated for economic reforms and £15 million (US\$18 million) for low carbon energy programmes in Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam.⁹¹

Since the Brexit referendum, the UK has begun planning for possible FTAs with Southeast Asian countries. This has included large-scale consultations with British private sector interests on

potentially acceding to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) which includes four Southeast Asian countries (Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam).⁹² At the bilateral level, the UK has discussed continuing arrangements under the recent EU-Singapore FTA with Britain post-Brexit,⁹³ and replicating the effects of the EU-Vietnam FTA, while consultations about possible future trade relations have also taken place with other ASEAN countries including Thailand and Indonesia.

Drivers behind the UK's Intensifying Relations with Southeast Asia

The previous section demonstrated that Britain's re-engagement with Southeast Asia has taken place in tandem with key themes outlined in the 2015 SDSR. Most of the individual policies pursued can be subsumed under drawing on and strengthening the UK's influence in the region as well as promoting prosperity. However, it is obvious that despite the multi-dimensional nature of Britain's re-engagement with the ASEAN countries, London has in practice focused on two broad forms of engagement in particular: defence engagement through an increase in the Royal Navy's presence in both Southeast Asia and the wider Asia Pacific; and the concerted efforts to promote economic ties with ASEAN countries. This section highlights three interconnected drivers to account for the characteristics of the UK's re-engagement with Southeast Asia.

Identity, Interests and Values

The idea of the UK as a power of global importance has long been at the core of British self-identity. This perspective builds on Britain's role as a permanent member of the UNSC and its famed diplomatic prowess (albeit now somewhat in question due to the chaos of Brexit), its economic power (the world's fifth largest economy) and its ability to draw on historical relations and to access strategic locations around the world. Importantly, the idea of Britain as an independent power existed even as the UK forged a close, but also ambivalent, relationship with its EU partners.⁹⁴ These identity constructions, which resonate with Britain's imperial past, have endured despite the country's relative decline, including as a naval power.⁹⁵ For the governing Conservative Party, the idea of Britain as a globally influential power has pervaded much of its thinking since 2010, manifested through the party's articulation of

British national identity as being “bound up in our historic global role as an outward-looking nation”.⁹⁶ Indeed, “Global Britain” also espouses the notion of the UK as a globally influential power and the necessity of projecting British values worldwide to defend the interests of the British people.⁹⁷ In this context, Conservative-led governments since 2010 have seemed prepared to acquiesce to the limitations governing Britain’s capacity to project hard power.⁹⁸ Yet at the policy level, conceptual connections have been drawn between aid, development and security, in order to combine material capabilities and soft power projection in an effort to demonstrate a “Great Power” role.⁹⁹ Arguably, the return to “East of Suez” is an important practical aspect of the efforts to validate the reconstruction of British identity as a globally influential power. The withdrawal from East of Suez in the early 1970s was an ignominious chapter in British history, with the departure of HMS *Mermaid* from Singapore in 1975 marking a low point for the country’s prestige in Southeast Asia.

Scholars and commentators may find the idea of Britain as a global power naive or delusional,¹⁰⁰ but the idea of a global role for the UK is clearly embraced by Conservative policymakers and senior post-holders in the MOD and the Royal Navy.¹⁰¹ Both former Prime Minister Theresa May and current Prime Minister Boris Johnson repeatedly emphasized this global role. Indeed, when he was foreign secretary, Johnson articulated a vision of Britain’s newest aircraft carrier, HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, sailing through the Straits of Malacca and into the South China Sea as one of its first missions.¹⁰² This vision may at the time have exceeded that of defence officials or the military leadership of the Royal Navy. However, since about the mid-2010s, a greater naval presence for the Royal Navy in Southeast Asia has been a topic for both.¹⁰³ With new naval capabilities now in place, and more to come in the next decade, Britain’s global orientation has progressively inspired a greater preoccupation with strategic developments in Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region.

If the Conservative Party has espoused a narrative of “Global Britain”, so it has argued that British security is ultimately predicated on a strong economy. Britain’s embeddedness in the global economy and its sensitivity to international economic shocks hence informs a sense of vulnerability. This has underpinned a policy interest under successive governments—certainly since Thatcherite Conservatism—to ensure British prosperity by promoting a neoliberal agenda that includes a focus on free trade, the liberalization of services and the

free flow of capital.¹⁰⁴ Aware of capacity limitations, yet determined to boost the country's economy, the Conservatives have thus adopted an "entrepreneurial approach" to diplomacy, not least by promoting British businesses overseas and attracting international investors. The launch of the "GREAT Britain" campaign also stemmed from Conservative beliefs that external relations and economic policy are mutually constitutive.¹⁰⁵

While China remained the main target of this economic engagement in Asia, the Coalition government saw advantage in broadening engagement in Southeast Asia because of its rapidly growing, young and educated population, aimed at increasing consumption and demand for British products and services.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the AEC holds the promise of a single market and production base across Southeast Asia for British companies.

Supporting the Pivot and the US Indo-Pacific Strategy

While the UK has pursued its own interests in Southeast Asia, America's "pivot/rebalance" towards Asia under President Barack Obama was supported and partially replicated by the Cameron government.¹⁰⁷ London has indeed shared many of Washington's wider strategic objectives across East Asia: denuclearizing North Korea; ensuring China is committed to good governance and the rules-based international order; ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea; and promoting democracy in a region where authoritarian currents still prevail.¹⁰⁸ The UK and America have also shared a concern centred on the proliferation of state-based and non-traditional security threats in Southeast Asia that were seen as contributing to an "arc of instability".¹⁰⁹ During the Obama era, policy coordination between London and Washington occurred both at a ministerial level and on the ground in Southeast Asia.¹¹⁰ To better coordinate policy towards Southeast Asia, the FCO reinforced its Asia teams in Washington and Brussels, and openly encouraged closer EU-US engagement in East Asia.

China's assertiveness in the South China Sea has been a particular shared concern between the UK and America.¹¹¹ The UK is consequently committed to maintaining a rules-based maritime order in accordance with UNCLOS, especially freedom of navigation. Britain's position is that territorial and jurisdictional disputes in the South China Sea should be resolved through dialogue and in accordance with international law to ensure the integrity of the current rules-based international order.¹¹² Indeed, Britain's strategic

re-engagement with the wider Indo-Pacific should be understood in the context of its alliance with the United States. As early as 2006, Britain announced that its future *Queen Elizabeth*-class aircraft carriers would embed British and American Joint Strike Fighters.¹¹³ The Coalition government inherited this project in 2010, announcing its decision to increase interoperability with American and French forces, which was again reiterated in the 2015 SDSR. There is also, historically, a particularly close alignment of interests between the Royal Navy and the US navy. Against the backdrop of the recapitalization of the Royal Navy, the Anglo-American naval partnership was reinforced in 2015, entailing a British commitment to “closer cooperation” with America.¹¹⁴ A shared vision of naval cooperation for the next fifteen years was spelled out in 2014.¹¹⁵ A navy-to-navy exchange programme was thus started that year which saw a liaison officer assigned to the US 7th fleet in Japan. For some years, a Royal Marines brigadier-general has served in Indo-Pacific Command in Honolulu working on theatre security cooperation.

Policymakers such as then Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson clearly aimed for Britain to be recognized as a credible partner for Washington in the Indo-Pacific region. The recent naval deployments to East Asia have focused in part on meeting US expectations regarding the joint enforcement of UN sanctions against North Korea. HMS *Albion*'s FONOP, as noted earlier, signalled Britain's willingness to respond to America's call for allies to undertake such actions in Southeast Asia. Recent British government statements and naval contributions are certainly in line with the Trump administration's 2017 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS).¹¹⁶ Indeed, the US Indo-Pacific Command appreciates British cooperation in deterring China from undermining regional maritime stability.¹¹⁷ The United States has gone as far as publicly welcoming British naval activity as playing a “critical role in maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific”.¹¹⁸ And as noted earlier, Britain has indicated a commitment to establish a future littoral strike group “East of Suez in the Indo-Pacific”.¹¹⁹

Brexit

Brexit accentuates these drivers of increased British engagement of Southeast Asia. For Conservatives keen to maintain an electoral edge over their domestic political opponents, it becomes convenient to amplify the vision of a Global Britain given the damage Brexit has done to the UK's international standing. Importantly, Brexit also

reinforces the pursuit of the prosperity agenda as leaving the EU will carry an economic cost, although it is uncertain how significant this will be.¹²⁰ Not surprisingly, the prospect of leaving the single market and customs union has led British policymakers to focus on rolling over existing or expected EU FTAs (e.g. with Singapore and Vietnam) under a proposed “Trade Agreement Continuity programme” and to explore the possibility for multilateral FTAs, including with countries in the Asia Pacific.¹²¹ Thinking about and pursuing future trade relationships has accordingly informed the Department for International Trade’s (DIT) work in addition to offsetting the probable implications of Brexit for inward investment.

The prospect of Brexit has also reinforced Britain’s determination to play a larger role in upholding the rules-based international order in Southeast Asia, and the wider Indo-Pacific region, alongside the United States and other regional powers. After all, its exit from the EU means that Britain will have to do more to represent its own interests and values. Protecting trade is one key consideration. And some within the Conservative Party have openly suggested that Brexit provides a unique opportunity to accentuate the vision for a global Royal Navy with a forward presence anchored around highly capable and globally deployable ships, thus giving the UK one of the most powerful navies in the world, certainly among Western countries and Japan.¹²²

Assessing British Strategizing towards Southeast Asia

Thus far, we have argued that although the UK does not have an explicit strategy for Southeast Asia its various initiatives in recent years to develop relations with the region are in line with the 2010 and 2015 SDSRs and 2018 NSCR and related strategizing. Is the projection of British influence towards Southeast Asia paying obvious dividends for the country’s political and economic ends? How coherent is Britain’s approach to the region? This final section is concerned with a provisional assessment regarding the effectiveness and coherence of the UK’s approach towards Southeast Asia. As a comprehensive evaluation is not possible within the confines of this article, we adopt four criteria. First, has the UK been able to strengthen bilateral relations? Second, can the UK expect to enter a dialogue partnership with ASEAN? Third, has the UK’s defence engagement vis-à-vis the wider Indo-Pacific been supported within Southeast Asia? Fourth, has the UK been able to make clear prosperity gains on the back of its economic and trade diplomacy?

Bilateral Relations

Strong ties with Singapore and Brunei aside, the UK's political relations with individual Southeast Asian states are still generally shallower than public diplomacy suggests. Britain's strategic partnership with Vietnam is illustrative. Although suggestive in name, the nature of this partnership has for years focused mostly on growing trade ties, primarily Vietnamese exports to the UK. Crucially, despite Britain offering diplomatic support on issues important to Vietnam (such as the South China Sea), Hanoi has generally not reciprocated on international issues that are important to London (such as the chemical nerve agent attack in Salisbury in March 2018, which according to the British government was carried out by officers belonging to Russian military intelligence) even as bilateral relations slowly progress. The UK's partnership arrangement with Indonesia has followed a similar path. While relations are said to be developing well, it took twelve years for the two countries to organize their second Partnership Forum in June 2019, which is considered the backbone of the bilateral relationship, alongside an inaugural defence dialogue. The relationship with Malaysia provides another example. What is particularly notable here is that UK-Malaysia relations did not strengthen under Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak following Prime Minister Cameron's visit in 2012, even though the former then appeared quite keen on closer relations. Malaysian interlocutors have attributed this to perceived overbearing attitudes on the part of the British, and a lacklustre British follow-up.¹²³ Once the 1MDB scandal was exposed, some of our interlocutors also felt the identity of the journalist running the Sarawak Report website may have contributed to relations becoming more delicate.

London's political relationship with Naypyidaw has also suffered again following the significant improvement of bilateral ties during the Thein Sein administration. Myanmar's diplomats note that since late 2017 bilateral relations have become rather one-dimensional, with the agenda of every official visit to Myanmar apparently being subordinated to the perceived political exigencies surrounding developments in Rakhine State.¹²⁴ The effectiveness of the UK's pressure on Myanmar is also not obvious despite considerable diplomatic efforts. Not only has Myanmar not accelerated the return of refugees from Bangladesh, but little has been achieved to address issues of accountability. It would thus seem that while London is adept at responding to domestic public opinion and unlikely to compromise key values, its efforts to affect change within Myanmar

have fallen short, although not for a lack of trying. Arguably, Britain's recent concentration on issues and challenges associated with the situation in Rakhine has also had the effect of sidelining its other foreign policy interests and diminished its role in facilitating wider political and economic reforms in Myanmar. It also remains to be seen whether the MOD's decision to suspend educational courses for Myanmar's military officers following army operations against the Rohingya in Rakhine State will hamper the UK's efforts to re-establish Britain as a preferred partner for the modernization of the country's armed forces. In short, UK diplomacy has achieved little over the last two years, although Myanmar officials continue to recognize the utility of DFID programmes. Notably, however, UK diplomacy on values has been effective in other situations. This is testified by the Sultan of Brunei giving assurances in relation to a de facto moratorium on the death penalty, and partially accepting Britain's recommendation to ratify the UN Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

In the eyes of some Southeast Asian states Brexit has also damaged Britain's international reputation. In June 2019, reports surfaced that the outgoing British High Commissioner to Singapore, Scott Wightman, had communicated to London how the present chaotic nature of UK politics was impacting foreign perceptions of the UK, with Singaporeans viewing Britain as a nation "beset by division, obsessed with ideology, careless of the truth, its leaders apparently determined to keep on digging". Despite underlining the enormous goodwill between the two countries, Wightman warned against British complacency and arrogance in the region, while also highlighting that former Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt was using the Singapore-UK Partnership for the Future in the "classic manner of the illusionist".¹²⁵ On the other hand, Brexit is also viewed as a huge opportunity in parts of Southeast Asia. Some Vietnamese interlocutors were especially positive about Britain's possible future role in upholding the existing regional order.¹²⁶ Concerns about Brexit are also balanced by an appreciation of London's membership of the UNSC.

ASEAN Dialogue Partnership

Despite Britain's extensive public diplomacy, it remains unclear whether it has done enough to persuade ASEAN members to consider positively a British application for Dialogue Partner status, now likely to be submitted within the next two years, which would require ASEAN

to bypass other earlier applicants at some political and reputational cost. At the Track-2 level, think tanks have been reluctant to offer an unambiguous endorsement on behalf of their home governments on such an application. Officials in some ASEAN member states doubt the UK's ability to sustain the diplomatic presence expected of Dialogue Partners, while others have suggested that Britain needs to further clarify its interests and explain how these would support the ASEAN Community agenda. In this context, it is noteworthy that Britain has so far been silent on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,¹²⁷ which the grouping agreed in 2019 to help mitigate growing Great Power friction, and for which Indonesia in particular is seeking endorsement, including from London.¹²⁸ Southeast Asian views suggest that notwithstanding Britain's contribution to regional security and its broader embeddedness in the region, neither is immediately fungible. Although several of the founding members of ASEAN (such as Singapore) have hinted strongly at their likely support for a British application, all member states have emphasized that ASEAN could only make the decision to bypass the moratorium and admit Britain as a Dialogue Partner by consensus. Notably, while thought seems to have been given in London as to whether Britain's values-focused policy towards the countries in the region could jeopardize the country's bid for ASEAN Dialogue Partnership status, British officials are clear that they will not compromise their values agenda.

Defence Engagement

While Britain managed to maintain a near continuous presence in the Asia-Pacific region in 2018, including training and port calls in Southeast Asia, there is some tension between claims concerning the Royal Navy's return to the region and the focus of its naval cooperation with Western powers and Japan in the first instance. Even considering the UK's contribution to FPDA exercises, its overall defence diplomacy with Southeast Asian states, let alone capacity-building, is limited. In the context of naval cooperation, this is partly a reflection of the different levels of capabilities the countries concerned bring to bear. Furthermore, it is natural for the Royal Navy to explore possibilities to deepen cooperation with close security partners and allies. Some observers even argue that the nature of the UK's defence engagement with Southeast Asian states may help avoid creating signals that could be misread in the region as a potentially costly commitment.¹²⁹

However, the Royal Navy's choice of focus has led some within Southeast Asia to view Britain's return as a military power with concern and at times suspicion. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has expressly voiced his concerns over the presence of foreign warships such as Britain's in the South China Sea.¹³⁰ There have also been questions in several Southeast Asian capitals about the timing, purpose and sustainability of recent British defence re-engagement. The recent interruption of the near-continuous presence during 2018 accentuates some of these questions. There are also concerns in some capitals that Britain will openly take the side of the United States against China, thus raising regional tensions further. At the same time, some also point out that even if London was to increase the Royal Navy's profile in Southeast Asia, the UK will in any case not be able to decisively affect the balance of power within the region. In short, Britain's proclaimed contributions to upholding the existing regional order has not necessarily translated into a renewed and immediate regional confidence in the UK that it could easily leverage, including for a new relationship with ASEAN.

In this context, it is also noteworthy that at the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD), both the United States and France, unlike Britain, laid out their interests and objectives in the region on the back of their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. In comparison to her French counterpart, then British Defence Secretary Penny Mordaunt's speech only vaguely reaffirmed Britain's commitment to be a reliable partner in Southeast Asia.¹³¹ Also bearing in mind that HMS *Defender* was re-routed to the Middle East, Southeast Asian observers may in the short term conclude that British naval operations will likely continue to be determined by wider strategic considerations in other regions where Britain also has vested security interests and arrangements, particularly given the limited number of globally deployable warships.¹³² This suggests that Britain will at the very least have to improve its strategic communications on what London hopes the Royal Navy will achieve in Southeast Asia in future years.

Promoting Prosperity

As the above overview demonstrates, Britain has undertaken a range of steps to achieve prosperity gains for itself in Southeast Asia. However, recent initiatives notwithstanding, British trading relationships with Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and the Philippines remain unsubstantial. Bilateral trade with Malaysia and Indonesia has fallen

far short of ambitious targets for years. Part of this can be attributed to the fact that Southeast Asia is a geopolitical and macroeconomic site of increasing interconnectivity and geopolitical tensions as major powers vie for influence in the region's economic development. UK companies thus often face significant competition and are outpriced in some countries. Meanwhile, existing UK efforts to affect and influence the wider political economy of some Southeast Asian states have hardly borne fruit. There remain numerous barriers for new market entrants. As a result, goods-exporting British companies tend to argue for further policies to address non-tariff barriers (NTBs) and political risks. This, however, puts them to some extent at odds with Britain's strong appetite for cultivating FTA options, since businesses often view FTAs as blunt instruments that are not able to address the problem of NTBs.

Conclusion

In 2012, Britain vowed to end the era of "benign neglect" in UK-Southeast Asia relations. Since then, it has invested considerably in its economic diplomacy and defence engagement with the region, in line with efforts to promote the government's prosperity agenda and to project its influence. The region clearly has a place in the UK's national security strategy even in the absence of an explicit Southeast Asia strategy. Indeed, with reference to "Global Britain" and a shared overarching strategic approach, individual Whitehall departments are continuing to work out their own strategies.

Explaining the strong focus on defence engagement and economic diplomacy, we showed how "Global Britain" allows Conservative policymakers to outline their thinking and ambitions about Britain as a "global power" while paying due attention to Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific. However, we also demonstrated that a growing UK commitment to greater defence engagement in Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Asia-Pacific predates the Brexit referendum. Similarly, the trade and economic policies pursued in Southeast Asia, and perceived underpinning exigencies and opportunities, can be linked to the years of austerity imposed under Conservative governments between 2010 and 2019, post-financial and economic crisis.¹³³ We argue that Brexit merely reinforces these drivers.

Despite its re-engagement, there are limits to the effectiveness of Britain's pursuit of globally unbounded values, ideas and interests in Southeast Asia. The UK may be a welcome partner across the region, but only in some cases are bilateral relations substantial from

Britain's perspective and, more importantly, from various regional perspectives. Even as Britain makes new diplomatic and resource investments in the region, British agendas have attracted interest but may not translate into more tangible policy successes. Clearly, there is resistance to parts of the UK's values agenda in some countries. Based on the record to date, the UK will also be required to play a long game in others by contributing to gradual shifts in practices that would facilitate greater economic embeddedness in the region. Southeast Asian governments have also sent mixed signals regarding a greater but nonetheless limited UK defence engagement.

Particularly regarding its defence engagement, the UK must carefully manage and balance its multiple interests in the wider Indo-Asia-Pacific.¹³⁴ The UK government may risk failing to achieve its regional ambitions, including its desire to strike a new relationship with ASEAN, if its defence engagement does not support Southeast Asian interests. In this regard, despite having invested some resources in its strategic communications, the British government will still need to further elucidate where Southeast Asia lies within its own strategic framework and regional approach to international security in the Indo-Asia-Pacific.

Generally speaking, the analysis provided in this article also suggests that there may be advantages for UK policymakers to further develop or refine their regional strategy towards Southeast Asia beyond the framework provided by the 2015 SDSR. This could arguably place more explicit focus on regional and national contexts in Southeast Asia and their interlinkages, take more systematically into account evolving perceptions of Britain within the region, and adopt a clearer prioritization of policy objectives considering available UK resources and policy instruments.

NOTES

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