



# The future of Britain's defence posture in the Indo-Pacific

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Strategic Defence Review (SDR), published in June 2025, outlined a 'NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organisation]-first, but not NATO only' defence posture for the United Kingdom (UK). While it designates the Euro-Atlantic as the priority theatre for British defence efforts, it acknowledges the importance of the Middle East and Indo-Pacific to the UK's security.
- The rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the Indo-Pacific presents a challenge to Britain and other free and open nations with interests in the region. However, the UK's strengths in the Indo-Pacific – including its soft power, membership of AUKUS, and the combined naval strength of Britain and its Indo-Pacific allies and partners – outmatches the PRC's equivalents.
- The UK should build upon its existing presence in the Indo-Pacific in the aftermath of the deployment of Carrier Strike Group 2025 (CSG2025). This includes, for example, collaboration with its regional allies and partners in joint exercises, technological innovation, and strengthening multilateral institutions of which Britain is a member.

**H**is Majesty's (HM) Government's Strategic Defence Review (SDR), published in June 2025, clarifies that a 'NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organisation]-first' orientation does not equate to an exclusive 'NATO-only' position. This distinction raises important questions about the implications for areas outside the Euro-Atlantic region, particularly the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East, which are now recognised as priority regions for defence engagement.<sup>1</sup> However, the SDR falls short in providing detailed strategies for these areas, emphasising that such efforts should not undermine deterrence and capability development in the Euro-Atlantic.

The concept of an Indo-Pacific 'tilt', highlighted in both the 2021 Integrated Review and subsequent 2023 Integrated Review Refresh, seems to be diminishing. Although this transition reflects a practical response to the current United States (US) administration's calls for Europe to assume greater responsibility for its defence, it should not mean that the United Kingdom (UK) relinquishes its role in the Indo-Pacific.

There are compelling reasons for Britain to sustain a moderate defence presence in the Indo-Pacific. The threats facing the UK, both domestically and internationally, are interconnected, regardless of their origin. Threats from Europe or further afield cannot be easily categorised based solely on geography – for example, Russia has used North Korean forces in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and has also garnered support from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Iran. Furthermore, Russia and the PRC have established a strategic partnership,<sup>2</sup> and are increasingly collaborating in the Indo-Pacific.

The PRC's growing military capabilities, described in the SDR as a 'sophisticated and persistent challenge',<sup>3</sup> are poised to shape global defence strategies, highlighting the need for British vigilance and adaptability. The UK should align its future capabilities with developments in the Indo-Pacific, especially since the lessons learned from the conflict in Ukraine may not fully address the complexities posed by the Chinese geopolitical challenge. To assess and counter this threat effectively, British deployments should prioritise collaboration with allies and partners in the region to enhance operational knowledge and experience.

The UK can bolster its Indo-Pacific partnerships through strategic measures, such as strengthening alliances beyond AUKUS, enhancing maritime cooperation, fostering technological collaborations, supporting multilateral institutions, and reforming its export control system. It should focus on a more coherent, yet modest, defence posture in the Indo-Pacific, acknowledging resource limitations and strategic challenges associated with the rise of the PRC. The most effective

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: Secure at home, strong abroad', Ministry of Defence, 02/06/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 26/11/2025).

<sup>2</sup> 'China and Russia: Partnership of strategic coordination', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, No date, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/> (checked: 26/11/2025).

<sup>3</sup> 'The Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer: Secure at home, strong abroad', Ministry of Defence, 02/06/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 26/11/2025).

strategy may involve a combination of British soft power and targeted military engagement in the region.

## The PRC challenge and deterrence strategy

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The UK's posture in the Indo-Pacific is fundamentally influenced by the PRC's growing assertiveness and military modernisation, with the SDR identifying it as both a strategic competitor and a potential threat to regional stability. Beijing's military modernisation, particularly in naval capabilities, has substantially altered the strategic environment following Britain's previous withdrawal from the region. Recent displays of Chinese military prowess during key international meetings, together with the increase of activity in and around Taiwan and the significant escalation of aggressive aviation incidents, serve as an unequivocal signal of its intentions to challenge the rules-based international order.

What does this situation imply for the UK's strategy? British military policy prioritises contributions to collective deterrence through displays of capability and commitment, rather than relying on an independent deterrent effect. However, the limited scale and sustainability of the British Armed Forces restrict their deterrent potential. While a single carrier strike group can project power, it cannot shift the military equilibrium in a region where the PRC can mobilise multiple carrier groups and advanced aircraft.

The stark contrast between the scale of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) – the PRC's naval force – compared to the US Navy presents alarming realities. Yet, the dynamic alters when considering the combined forces of allies including Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK. The PRC struggles to replicate similar alliances, and its partnerships with nations including Russia, Iran and North Korea – the so-called 'CRINK' nations – often exhibit a competitive rather than cooperative character, reflecting a strategy of convenience for Beijing.<sup>4</sup>

Many regional nations are attempting to balance their relationships between the US and the PRC; a dynamic that presents opportunities for Britain to assert its influence. The UK is recognised for its soft power in the Indo-Pacific, and typically aligns its actions with its stated intentions – albeit modestly compared to American or Chinese efforts. Engagement in frameworks such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Dialogue Partner status enhances Britain's potential to communicate effectively with regional stakeholders,

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<sup>4</sup> These nations do not maintain formal alliances, but often align themselves against common adversaries, particularly the US and its allies and partners. Their relationships may be based on mutual interests in countering free and open nations' influence globally.

with a recent survey by the Lowy Institute positioning the UK as the fourth most important defence partner for Southeast Asian nations, following the US, Australia, and Japan.<sup>5</sup>

## British defence posture in the Indo-Pacific after Operation HIGHMAST

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Operation HIGHMAST, the deployment of the Royal Navy-led Carrier Strike Group 2025 (CSG2025), underscored the UK's commitment to a collective defence presence in the Indo-Pacific; a region central to global security and economic interests. However, there have been questions about the persistence and sustainability of Carrier Strike Group deployments in the context of the SDR and existing global tensions.

### The AUKUS factor: Deepening strategic commitment

Central to Britain's Indo-Pacific strategy is the AUKUS trilateral partnership with the US and Australia, which has become crucial for its long-term engagement in the region. AUKUS not only involves submarine technology, but also aims to foster deeper defence collaboration among the three nations.

AUKUS Pillar I focuses on providing Australia with conventionally armed nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs), representing a significant technology-sharing initiative. The UK will contribute design expertise through the SSN-AUKUS programme, intending for these vessels to enter service by the late 2030s.<sup>6</sup> Short-term plans include British submarine rotations to Australia starting as early as 2027.

More transformative may be AUKUS Pillar II, which includes cutting-edge technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), quantum computing, hypersonic weapons, and cyber capabilities. This collaborative framework allows the UK to draw on American and Australian technological advancements while enhancing its own capabilities, positioning it for greater strategic engagement in the evolving Indo-Pacific landscape.

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<sup>5</sup> Rahman Yaacob, Susannah Patton, and Jack Sato, 'Southeast Asia's evolving defence partnerships', Lowy Institute, 19/08/2025, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/> (checked: 26/11/2025).

<sup>6</sup> Claire Mills, 'AUKUS submarine (SSN-A) programme', House of Commons Library, 05/08/2025, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/> (checked: 26/11/2025).

## Persistent presence: Maritime forces

While carrier deployments attract attention, the backbone of Britain's presence in the Indo-Pacific lies in the persistent engagement provided by Royal Navy vessels such as HMS Spey and HMS Tamar. Deployed since September 2021 on a five-year mission, these Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) illustrate the UK's dedication to consistent operational presence.

Their activities reinforce British credibility, with HMS Tamar, for example, executing surveillance and monitoring operations in the East China Sea, participating in regional exercises, and assisting in humanitarian missions. Continuous engagement through these assets provides constant intelligence, maintains essential relationships with regional partners, and asserts the UK's commitment to securing freedom of navigation in contested waters. This enduring presence could serve as a model for future larger Royal Navy deployments.

## The role of land and air forces

For British land and air forces, opportunities in the Indo-Pacific demand strategic focus distinct from naval deployments. The Royal Air Force (RAF) has successfully demonstrated capabilities through deployments such as the biennial Exercise PITCH BLACK in Australia, where it showcased operational reach by flying over 9,000 miles in 2024.<sup>7</sup>

Building upon these successes offers several avenues for future RAF action in the Indo-Pacific. This includes pre-positioning equipment, whereby establishing maintenance facilities in key locations (such as Darwin or Guam) could enhance response times as operational costs; implementing regular squadron rotations, rather than isolated deployments, to bolster the RAF's long-term military footprint; expanding bilateral training by engaging in regular training exercises with like-minded nations, such as Japan and South Korea, to enhance interoperability and mutual capabilities; and implementing advanced joint training programmes designed to strengthen tactics such as air-to-air refuelling, thus improving collaborative defence capacity.

The British Army retains a permanent presence in Brunei, comprising approximately 1,000 troops, including a Gurkha battalion, support forces, and an Army Air Corps helicopter flight.<sup>8</sup> Recent engagements have largely involved specialised roles. Further opportunities for expansion could include increasing the regular deployment of British Army training teams to enhance local forces' capabilities in urban warfare and amphibious operations; utilising future personnel from planned deployments to the Indo-Pacific to pave the way for extensive, larger-scale joint exercises; strengthening liaison teams with countries such as

<sup>7</sup> 'RAF aircraft begin major exercise in Australia', Royal Air Force, 17/07/2024, <https://www.raf.mod.uk/> (checked: 26/11/2025).

<sup>8</sup> 'About BFB', British Forces Brunei, No date, <https://www.britishforcesbrunei.co.uk/> (checked: 26/11/2025).

Japan and Australia to bolster joint operational effectiveness; and facilitating training centres to foster deeper cooperation and shared expertise.

Given that land and air forces require host nation agreements, diplomatic groundwork is vital for expanding capabilities. It is essential that the UK prioritises developing these agreements to facilitate deeper engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

## Future trajectory and strategic options

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Looking beyond the CSG2025 deployment, Britain faces critical decisions regarding the scale and nature of its Indo-Pacific defence posture. The SDR sets a hierarchy of priorities – emphasising the primacy of the Euro-Atlantic, followed by that of the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific – yet it maintains a commitment to engagement in these regions.

The pressing challenge for the UK is articulating the implications of these priorities for the Indo-Pacific, ensuring clarity in its strategic messaging. Partner nations require assurance about Britain's intentions and commitments beyond 2025 – although the momentum from CSG2025 may carry into 2026, the resurgence of NATO issues related to Russian activities in Europe may shift the UK's focus and resources back towards the continent.

Several factors will shape the future of British posture. The 2021-2025 Biden administration's approach to alliance burden-sharing could pressure European allies to increase their contributions in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>9</sup> However, pressing security demands from Russia may limit available resources for distant deployments. A coordinated European approach in the Indo-Pacific, including contributions by the UK, could maximise existing capabilities and offer value through joint action.

The success of AUKUS will also be paramount in establishing Britain's long-term regional relevance. Timely delivery of the submarine programme and progress in collaborative technological advancements may yield increased integration into the Indo-Pacific defence architecture, while potential delays could undermine the UK's influence.

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<sup>9</sup> 'The United States' Enduring Commitment to the Indo-Pacific: Marking Two Years Since the Release of the Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy', US Department of State, 09/02/2024, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/> (checked: 26/11/2025).



## Assessing resource allocation

Resource allocation poses ongoing challenges as Britain develops its plans for Indo-Pacific commitments. The British Armed Forces currently contribute significantly to NATO's Allied Reaction Force, with over 2,600 personnel deployed to Eastern Europe.<sup>10</sup> This commitment is essential, but strategies for resource management should be flexible.

By adjusting their scale and the length of time of personnel rotations, the UK could reduce the size of regular NATO exercises while ensuring that core Article Five obligations remain intact, thus creating space for additional commitments in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, shared leadership roles would encourage collaborative leadership in multinational battlegroups, in turn enhancing deterrence while lessening the burden on the British Armed Forces.

The UK also maintains significant overseas garrisons that could potentially allow for resource reallocation. Evaluating these deployments may uncover opportunities for optimisations (see: Box 1).

### BOX 1: OPPORTUNITIES FOR OPTIMISING BRITISH ARMED FORCES DEPLOYMENTS

- **Sovereign Base Areas in Cyprus:** Transitioning from two resident infantry battalions to one may be defensible, given contemporary strategic realities.
- **Gibraltar:** Some garrison functions may be civilianised or reduced with modern security threats in mind.
- **Brunei:** Enhanced operational deployment of troops based in Brunei could yield greater regional influence.

As well as these, training facilities in Belize, Kenya, Canada, and beyond could similarly be consolidated for efficiency. Rationalising regional training activities could minimise logistical burdens while addressing operational imperatives, and some specialised training may be more effective if relocated to operational theatres in the Indo-Pacific. Leveraging training facilities in Canada, for example, could be optimised by adjusting the scope of existing programmes. Operations in the Persian Gulf, as well as ongoing commitments in Iraq, are also potentially scalable if regional situations stabilise, which would allow for redeployment of naval and air assets.

<sup>10</sup> 'Thousands of British troops to lead major NATO exercise in Eastern Europe', Ministry of Defence, 03/01/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 26/11/2025).

It should also be noted that HM Government's commitment to a NATO-centric defence policy necessitates any reallocation to preserve key Article Five commitments, the security of the British Overseas Territories, and balancing traditional commitments with the increased focus on 'peer adversary' threats.

The most logical approach thus involves optimising current deployments rather than significant reductions, using flexible rotations and sharing responsibilities with allies and partners to create capacity for increased Indo-Pacific engagement.

## Aligning strategic goods exports to the Indo-Pacific

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Effective deterrence against burgeoning Chinese maritime claims necessitates empowering regional partners to develop credible capabilities. The UK's most feasible contribution lies in enhancing regional partners' capacities rapidly through strategic goods exports aligned with deterrent objectives.

The case of Taiwan illustrates Britain's potential to address specific capability gaps effectively. By reforming its export control framework, the UK could streamline the export process across Indo-Pacific partners that are vulnerable to Chinese coercion, focusing on nations such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

HM Government's 'UK strategic export controls annual report 2024' indicates that of 12,752 licences granted, a significant portion (84.8%) were Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs).<sup>11</sup> While necessary, the complexity of SIELs creates considerable administrative burden on the Export Control Joint Unit (ECJU). The establishment of an AUKUS Open General Export Licence (OGEL) signifies a breakthrough in reducing bureaucratic barriers, allowing strategic asset exports to flow swiftly to partners.

The SDR recommends a government review of export licensing policies to enhance clarity for industry and international partners. Creating an Indo-Pacific OGEL (IP-OGEL) for specific partners, focused on designated capabilities, could facilitate strategic advantages without lengthy individual licence processes.

Transitioning from SIELs to a more OGEL-centric licensing environment must ensure that exports do not contribute to internal repression or undermine security in the Indo-Pacific. A functional IP-OGEL should therefore target specific products with a defensive character and limited offensive capabilities.

The envisioned Defence Export Office (DEO) could identify goods for the IP-OGEL based on the following categories:

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<sup>11</sup> 'UK strategic export controls annual report 2024', Export Control Joint Unit, 18/07/2025, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 26/11/2025).



1. **SIEL risk management:** Products that present manageable risks while supporting allies;
2. **Strategic deterrence support:** Goods that meet the strategic needs of Indo-Pacific allies; and
3. **British export capability:** Ensuring vendor readiness to deliver the identified strategic goods.

## Strategic partnerships and defence diplomacy

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The landscape of the UK's Indo-Pacific defence posture is increasingly reliant upon an intricate web of strategic partnerships, extending beyond traditional alliances. A prominent example is Japan, not only as a significant regional ally, but also as a partner in key initiatives such as the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) alongside Italy. Singapore also plays a vital logistics role within British operations, enabling seamless support for both OPVs and carrier strike groups. The enduring framework of the Five Power Defence Arrangements also continues to facilitate multilateral collaboration with Southeast Asian nations.

India's position as a partner is complex. Growing defence cooperation is often juxtaposed with its historic non-alignment and nuanced ties with the PRC. As a result, the UK's engagement strategy involves enhancing maritime security cooperation, including co-leading the Maritime Security Pillar of India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative and establishing a Regional Maritime Security Centre of Excellence, while also maintaining that territorial disputes such as that over Kashmir are bilateral matters for peaceful resolution between India and Pakistan.

Britain can strengthen its Indo-Pacific partnerships through strategic approaches, including the following options:

1. **Strengthening alliances:** Beyond AUKUS, the UK should deepen relationships with Japan, South Korea, and India through joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, and emerging technology development.
2. **Increasing maritime cooperation:** Enhanced coordination for freedom of navigation operations with like-minded nations will convey a sustained commitment, while establishing rotating bases or logistical hubs can maximise British operational impact.
3. **Fostering technological partnerships:** Joint research initiatives in cybersecurity, clean energy, and other fields can further bind the UK and its allies and partners together through shared advancements, with AI being a potential area for British leadership.

4. **Strengthening multilateral institutions:** Reforms within frameworks such as ASEAN, or the introduction of new multilateral groupings focused on climate adaptation and cybersecurity, can foster collaboration on pressing challenges.
5. **Export control reforms:** The UK should refine its export control system to enable the supply of denial-centric exports, focusing on an IP-OGEL for strategically aligned partners.

The essential goal is to evolve from symbolic gestures to substantive, persistent engagement that yields mutual benefits for both Britain and its allies and partners. Moreover, the UK should ensure it retains modest and realistic expectations of what it can achieve in the Indo-Pacific.

## Balancing ambition and reality

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Britain's Indo-Pacific defence posture after CSG2025 reflects a significant ambition to maintain influence amid constrained resources. While carrier strike group deployments, persistent naval presence, and deepening alliances underscore a commitment to regional security, there must be a balance between rhetoric and capability realities.

Critics have pointed out that the UK's current military presence is modest when compared to the scale of regional challenges.<sup>12</sup> As such, Britain cannot effectuate significant shifts in military dynamics independently or maintain high-intensity operations without considerable support.

The UK's engagement focuses not on standalone capabilities, but on enhancing collective deterrence and fostering alliance cohesion. The efforts demonstrated through CSG2025 showcase that European powers are still able to undertake global power projection, thereby reassuring regional partners wary of American reliability.

Ultimately, successful Indo-Pacific engagement hinges on matching commitments with resources while maintaining the support of allies and partners. Britain should not overextend its limited military capabilities or overpromise deliverables that it cannot fulfil. Within these limits, the UK's Indo-Pacific posture signifies a meaningful contribution to regional stability, laying the groundwork for a deeper engagement in a pivotal strategic arena.

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<sup>12</sup> Tim Martin, 'UK lawmakers say "limited", "modest" Indo-Pacific presence not enough to address China threat', *Breaking Defence*, 24/10/2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/> (checked: 26/11/2025).



Britain can no longer rely solely on defence ties or military partnerships for access arrangements. It is essential to develop digital infrastructure, financial systems, and technology networks to create a structural influence that surpasses traditional military relationships – a truly integrated approach. The legacy of CSG2025 will not be measured merely in terms of fleet size or operational numbers, but rather in the relationships forged and the foundations established for ongoing engagement.

To ensure a sustainable British posture in the Indo-Pacific, HM Government should consider the following elements for a broader foundation for future establishment:

1. Comprehensive engagement that weaves together defence with trade, finance, education, and technology;
2. An emphasis on digital infrastructure and technological dependency, which are increasingly as strategically critical as traditional basing rights;
3. A more prominent defence-industrial presence, including exports, to foster ‘sticky’ long-term relationships; and
4. Most importantly, leveraging the UK’s strengths – such as elite training, trusted financial practices, regulatory knowledge, and soft power – rather than trying to compete with the US or the PRC on sheer volume.

## Conclusion

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Britain’s Indo-Pacific strategy cannot rely on episodic deployments alone. It should be underpinned by a wider ecosystem of influence that only the UK can uniquely offer. In light of shifting global dynamics, particularly the PRC’s rise as a central strategic competitor, Britain should navigate its Indo-Pacific defence strategy with careful consideration.

By balancing military engagement with robust diplomatic efforts, the UK can uphold meaningful partnerships and address the complexities of securing regional cooperation. Clear articulation of its strategic objectives and commitment to collaborative defence initiatives should also play a vital role in reinforcing its presence in the Indo-Pacific.

Furthermore, recognising the interconnectedness of modern geopolitics is indispensable for maintaining both Britain’s traditional influence and the resilience of its regional partnerships. Through strategic foresight and reliable engagement, the UK could position itself to contribute to a stable and secure Indo-Pacific,

establishing foundations for long-term partnerships that can thrive amid evolving global challenges.



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