

A light grey, stylized map of Asia and Oceania serves as the background for the page. The map shows the outlines of the continents and major islands, with a focus on the region between Australia and East Asia.

Submission to the UK Strategic Defence Review

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As a UNSC P5 member with global interests, the UK must maintain a defence presence in the Indo-Pacific, the world's most important region. This is not a distraction from NATO commitments. It is a strategic requirement that flows from the integrated nature of security between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific, and the concerted challenge to the UK's vital interests, and those of its close partners, now posed by authoritarian regimes, including China's page 9 / 11 and North Korea's support for Russia's war in Ukraine. In the same vein, the UK should factor China's and North Korea's expanding nuclear capabilities into its deterrence posture.

The UK also needs a defence presence in the Indo-Pacific to protect its prosperity interests, as the coexistence of strategic threats and economic opportunities is a defining feature of the region. Given China's global presence, distance-shrinking technologies and economic interdependencies, trusted cross-regional partnerships that straddle regional silos are essential. The advent of AUKUS and GCAP amply demonstrates this.

The requirement for an ongoing UK military presence in the Indo-Pacific is partly to fulfil existing commitments, including through the Five Power Defence Arrangements, in Southeast Asia, and the UN Command on the Korean Peninsula. AUKUS has added an important new dimension, as an "enhanced security partnership that promotes a free and open Indo-Pacific that is secure and stable". This includes a commitment to deploy a UK attack submarine to Australia, in addition to accelerated capability development.

Fortunately, the UK defence establishment is well placed to capitalise on its impressive rate of effort in the Indo-Pacific over the past 5-6 years, provided that the current level of defence resourcing is at least maintained. Britain already has a parsimonious resident defence presence in Brunei and Singapore, and through small regional staffs in Singapore and Canberra. These should be maintained.

Demand signals in the region are currently strongest from Australia, Japan and the US. There is broader appetite for UK defence engagement from within ASEAN and Oceania, as well as the Republic of Korea.

The UK's strategic partnership with Australia is now underpinned by a new, treaty-level defence cooperation agreement and SOFA. Australia has the potential to serve as a maritime hub facing both sides of the Indo-Pacific. In addition to submarine deployments and amphibious warfare training, frigates could be forward deployed from Australia in future, replacing the current pair of offshore patrol vessels in the region. Expeditionary carrier and amphibious deployments should continue on an alternating drumbeat tied to major multinational exercises in the region to maximise their defence engagement value.

Beyond Australia, Japan is now the UK's closest defence partner in Asia. As a founding member of the GCAP consortium, Japan should be a focus for air force engagement. The British Army will naturally have the smallest service footprint in the region, but its diplomatic role in defence engagement is essential to unlocking defence and wider political relations, especially in Southeast Asia, where Brunei and Singapore are well established as defence hubs