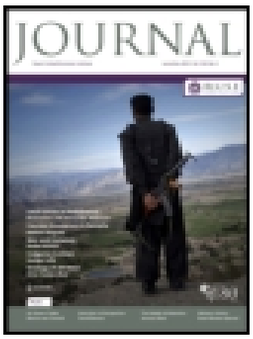

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# Assurance and Deterrence in the UK's East Asia Policies

## (In)credible UK?

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# Assurance and Deterrence in the UK's East Asia Policies

## (In)credible UK?

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East Asia is essential to the UK's post-Brexit international strategy. Within a complex web of bilateral and multilateral arrangements, the UK needs to manage historical ties, new strategic objectives and ongoing partnerships. Underpinning these interactions is trust and some of the dynamics more commonly associated with formal security alliances. Post-Brexit, there is a need to assure these states of the UK's place in the world and particularly its commitment to, and strategic objectives in, the region, but also recognise that there is an increasing risk of moral hazard for the UK in seeking to achieve some of its objectives. Catherine Jones offers a framework for understanding the challenges and opportunities for the UK's current planning in the region.

In 2021, the UK government published the Integrated Review.[1] It claimed that 'by 2030, we will be deeply engaged in the Indo-Pacific as the European partner with the broadest, most integrated presence in support of mutually-beneficial trade, shared security and values'.[2] The document also provided a framework for how this objective will be achieved.[3] Subsequently, in April 2022, then UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss articulated that the UK's 'prosperity and security must be built on a network of strong partnerships',[4] and that in the Indo-Pacific these partners were identified as Japan, India and Indonesia.

On 12 December 2022, UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly acknowledged that:

> Now, we have to recognise that the UK's future influence will depend on persuading and winning over a far broader array of countries, countries in the Commonwealth, in the African Union, in ASEAN and elsewhere. [...]
>
> Our job is to make our case and earn their support, investing in relationships based on patient diplomacy, on respect, on solidarity, and a willingness to listen. Because this isn't about dictating or telling others what they should do: we want a balanced and mutually beneficial relationship, based on shared interests and common principles.[5]

These statements highlight a collective view that the UK's future prosperity will depend on building strong and enduring partnerships – especially in the Indo-Pacific and specifically East Asia. However, these statements also open the prospect that these partnerships will be based on a panoply of interests and common principles. What, then, are the 'shared interests and common principles' that the foreign secretary believes will inform the UK's relationships in the region, and how consistent and

1. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (London: The Stationery Office, 2021).
2. *Ibid*, p. 6.
3. *Ibid*, pp. 66–69.
4. Liz Truss, 'The Return of Geopolitics: Foreign Secretary's Mansion House Speech at the Lord Mayor's 2022 Easter Banquet', 27 April 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretarys-mansion-house-speech-at-the-lord-mayors-easter-banquet-the-return-of-geopolitics>, accessed 18 May 2022.
5. Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), 'British Foreign Policy and Diplomacy: Foreign Secretary's Speech', 12 December 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretarys-speech-12-december-2022>, accessed 12 December 2022.

British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly delivering a keynote speech on the future of UK foreign policy, December 2022. *Courtesy of Toby Melville / PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo*

enduring are they? The statements to date offer insufficient specificity, and a wide range of options for implementation of UK commitments means they therefore fail to reassure. Even more concerningly, this lack of specificity opens the prospect of China using 'cheese diplomacy' (gradual nibbling away at a cohesive group of states) to drive a wedge between the UK and its long-term and emergent partners.

> What, then, are the 'shared interests and common principles' that the foreign secretary believes will inform the UK's relationships in the region, and how consistent and enduring are they?

This article draws on new thinking about alliances from Iain Henry[6] at the Australian National University, who argues that there is a need to understand the interdependent nature of alliances and the underpinning logic of an alliance relationship. In light of this new approach to understanding alliance management, this article considers the UK's current plans to become the most committed European power in the Indo-Pacific through the lens of assurance and deterrence and moral hazard. It argues that it is difficult, and will become increasingly problematic, for the UK to deepen existing alliances and partnerships in the region because of the complex geometry that exists between potential partners. Assurance towards one may alienate or push away another and all moves will bear heightened risks.

## The UK's International Credibility: Why Is This an Indo-Pacific Problem?

Understanding the underpinning principles of the alliance (strategic, values or political) will determine how one pattern of assurance might be a cause of negative consequences in other alliances. Alliances are interdependent;[7] they cannot be viewed as state-to-state relationships, because they exist in a context. Importantly, allies may not always want to see the ally being 'reliable' in all of its other

6. Iain Henry, 'What Allies Want: Reconsidering Loyalty, Reliance, and Alliance Interdependence', *International Security* (Vol. 44, No. 4, 2020), pp. 45–83.
7. *Ibid*.

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alliance relationships, as this might undermine the underpinning logic of other alliances.[8] For example, if your alliance is premised on common democratic values and respect for human rights, you may not want to see your ally investing treasure and blood in an ally that is for 'mere' strategic purpose – especially if this draws resources away from the pursuit of democratic values or indeed challenges them.

A powerful and recent example is helpful here. In relation to the withdrawal from Afghanistan, many in the mass media and on social media argued that the withdrawal would cause concerns in all the alliances the US has, and that the perception that the US was hastily abandoning Afghanistan would cause soul-searching in all the other US alliances. However, following Henry's logic, the withdrawal would affect the US allies in the Indo-pacific differently – simultaneously reassuring some and triggering fears in others. For instance, Taiwan should have been most concerned about the withdrawal from Afghanistan, whereas Japan and South Korea may have been less concerned. This is because Taiwan's relationship is maintained through a logic of common values. While it is a strategic asset, it has been known for several decades that the People's Republic of China could take Taiwan by force and the US would be forced to a position of reclaiming or liberating rather than holding. For these reasons, Taiwan should have been extremely concerned.

> The UK has a credibility problem in engaging with the region

South Korea's and Japan's underpinning alliances with the US, on the other hand, are based less on values (South Korea was an ally even when it was a dictatorship) and is of a broader nature – it is military, strategic, and the balance of power is still in favour of the US. Moreover, South Korea and Japan 'bring more' to the table than Taiwan, and the withdrawal from Afghanistan brings the potential for greater investment in the Indo-Pacific. Overall, these two states may have been more reassured than concerned over the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

What then of the UK's relationships with these regional powers and regional forums? The UK has a credibility problem in engaging with the region: it has already raised concerns about its reliability of alliances based on values following the response over Hong Kong, and it will take many decades to build trust among regional partners. Moreover, the UK will have to try to first understand and, second, manage myriad regional tensions, and how history and emotions affect relations between these partners.

## The Importance of Context

There are three processes that are important in the UK's regional engagement. First, setting an underpinning context of gradual deepening engagement and understanding – for example, how the UK has been approaching its relations with Japan since the signing of the agreed memorandum on security and defence cooperation in 2012.

Second, this underpinning context needs to be punctuated with 'events of commitment', whereby the UK 'gets the response right', whether that is responding to climate-induced regional disasters (for example, through the effective use of the Littoral Response Group that should be deployed now the Carrier Strike Group has returned to the UK) or other regional challenges.[9]

Third, the UK needs urgently to understand the dynamics between states in the region, not only to get the context and the events right, but also to ensure it does not compound the fractured and, at times, fragile regional architecture. This would involve recognising that, at present, its relations with South Korea have been described as requiring closer cooperation (in areas other than the economy)[10] and there is a need for the UK to better understand domestic political dynamics in South Korea,[11] whereas its relations with Japan (in security and defence) have been gradually deepening since 2012. The signing of the UK–Japan reciprocal access agreement on 11 January 2023, and the expectation of a defence agreement following a visit to the UK by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, are the most

8. *Ibid*.
9. Ministry of Defence, 'UK Carrier Strike Group to Exercise with Indo-Pacific Partners', press release, 19 July 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-carrier-strike-group-to-exercise-with-indo-pacific-partners>, accessed 18 January 2023.
10. FCDO, 'UK-Republic of Korea Foreign Ministerial Strategic Dialogue 2022: Joint Statement', policy paper, 28 September 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-republic-of-korea-strategic-dialogue-2022/uk-republic-of-korea-foreign-ministerial-strategic-dialogue-2022-joint-statement>, accessed 18 January 2023.
11. Saeme Kim, 'The UK and South Korea: Attention to Detail', *RUSI Commentary*, 2 September 2021.

substantial elements of that cooperation to date.[12] Engaging with these partners will be complicated because of the ongoing difficulties in relations between South Korea and Japan over historical issues including 'comfort women' and maritime disputes. Moreover, the structural context in which these relationships develop will be important, as noted by Victor D Cha and others;[13] whether alliances (or looser partnerships) develop in a uni-, bi-, or multilateral structure will have an effect on the ability of each partner to direct and use the relationships formed.

## The UK: An Acute Credibility Problem

The UK's current approach to the Indo-Pacific enhances the potential for China to drive a wedge between the commitments of several Western powers. The UK's commitments are insufficiently specific to assure, too incredible to deter, and open the UK to being drawn into actions and activities with partners that could enhance the likelihood of the UK being drawn into conflicts that amount to 'moral hazard'.

The crux of these issues is understanding the UK's wider credibility problems. Since the vote to leave the EU in 2016, the UK has increased its rhetoric of global commitment, but has also struggled with implementation. For example, it is impossible to ignore the bungled withdrawal from Afghanistan, described in a Foreign Affairs Select Committee report as 'a disaster and a betrayal of our allies that will damage the UK's interests for years to come'.[14] This finding runs counter to its commitments to building new partnerships. Similarly, the call for China to follow the rules in Liz Truss's Mansion House speech of 2021 is undermined by the UK's continuing battle with the EU over the Northern Ireland Protocol and legislative efforts to unilaterally rescind its commitments. The damage this creates for UK credibility and deterrence is captured by reports in China since the speech, which claimed 'British foreign policy since Brexit has been premised on an effective delusion – that is, the nostalgia of a long-gone era whereby Britannia ruled the waves and wielded the power of a global empire, which allowed it to impose its will on others'.[15]

This credibility problem can be explored through a range of legitimate questions about how regional partners can understand – and have confidence in – the UK's Indo-Pacific tilt:

- What are the UK's hierarchy of interests in the region (for example, when will one interest – and corresponding commitment – trump another)?
- Do the UK's resource commitments match the country's interests, values and rhetorical commitments?
- How is China likely to interpret the UK's commitment to the region?
- What are the likely actions if China perceives opportunities to drive a wedge between the UK and its potential partners through exposing differences in values and interests?
- How is Vietnam to interpret UK support if there are significant differences in values on which partnership may be premised? Do interests trump values or is there more complexity here?

At present, the UK's approach increases moral hazard to the UK and does not enhance the deterrence capacity of existing dynamics in the region. This is because of the lack of specificity of the commitments, the breadth of ambiguity of what the UK can and wants to do in the region, and lack of credibility given its track record with other international commitments. In addition, it has insufficient understanding of East Asia's regional strategic cultures to provide credible assurances. In particular, what risks will the UK willingly incur on behalf of other regional partners and actors? Without some clarity on the risk profile of the region and how the UK would intersect with it, reassurance is unlikely to be effective.

12. Louisa Brooke Holland, 'UK-Japan Defence Agreement 2023', Research Briefing, House of Commons Library, 13 January 2023, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9704/>, accessed 18 January 2023.
13. Victor D Cha, 'Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism in Asia: The United States, Japan, and Korea', *International Studies Quarterly* (Vol. 44, No. 2, 2000), pp. 261–91, p. 263.
14. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee, 'Missing in Action: UK Leadership and the Withdrawal from Afghanistan', 17 May 2022, <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/1465/government-policy-on-afghanistan/publications/>, accessed 31 May 2022.
15. Louisa Brooke-Holland, John Curtis and Claire Mills, 'The AUKUS Agreement', Report No. 09335, 11 October 2021, p. 5, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk>, accessed 31 May 2022; Tom Fowdy, 'UK's Fiery Rhetoric Has No Basis in Reality', *China Daily*, 6 May 2022, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202205/06/WS627470d3a310fd2b29e5aec7.html>, accessed 31 May 2022.

## The UK's Ambitions Versus Its Commitments

As set out in the Integrated Review and James Cleverly's speech at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in December 2022,[16] the UK's objectives – of building enduring global partnerships and networks – are underpinned by assumptions that these relationships will be forged with states with whom the UK has common global approaches, shared values and mutual commitments to upholding international norms and rules. In practice, the UK's ambition to become 'deeply engaged in the Indo-Pacific' will face significant obstacles.

The first challenge is to understand what type of engagement the UK is seeking and therefore, what expectations are set.[17] The author argues that there is utility in exploring the UK's approach through concepts more commonly associated with formal alliances. This article uses the following definitions:

**Deterrence:** In 1979, Robert Jervis postulated that deterrence constituted 'the ways in which an actor manipulates threats to harm others in order to coerce them into doing what he desires';[18] he also highlighted the 'paradoxical nature of deterrence in which each side hopes to gain security, not by being able to protect itself, but by threatening to inflict unacceptable damage on the others'.[19]

**Assurance:** Justin Anderson, Jeffrey Larson and Polly Holdorf stated in 2012 that 'As a strategic concept, assurance represents the means and methods employed to convince a US ally or partner that the United States can guarantee its safety from intimidation, coercion, or attack by foreign actors'.[20] Keith B Payne offered a slightly different definition, by arguing that 'Assurance, in turn, requires the easing of allies' fears and sensitivities, which again may have little or nothing to do with how the United States might prefer to terminate a conflict'.[21] This article uses the following definition of assurance: credible actions by states ranging from reassuring a partner of its contribution to implementing consequences that would occur in the event of a hostile or aggressive action by an adversary. The outcome of assurance should produce a reduction of fear and therefore adjust evaluations of threat perception.

As noted above, the Integrated Review set an ambition to be deeply engaged in the Indo-Pacific[22] and to establish 'a greater and more persistent presence than any other European country'.[23] On first reading this appears to commit the UK to a significant upsurge in economic, military and diplomatic commitments to the region, and especially to the specified sub-region of East Asia.

> The first challenge is to understand what type of engagement the UK is seeking and therefore, what expectations are set

However, 'deeply engaged' is not synonymous with most committed.[24] Throughout the document there is a vagueness about exactly what the UK's commitments to the Indo-Pacific are. According to leading works on alliances and partnerships, assurance, deterrence, and moral hazard, strategic ambiguity plays an important role in achieving both assurance and deterrence. One could argue that the imprecision of the UK's expression here is helpful in relation to its regional goals, as a balance of ambiguity and specificity is beneficial to both the UK and its partners.

Yet this argument is not appropriate in the case of the UK and the Indo-Pacific. Given the disconnect

16. James Cleverly, 'British Foreign Policy and Diplomacy: Foreign Secretary's Speech 12 December 2022', <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretarys-speech-12-december-2022>, accessed 18 January 2023.
17. Even the AUKUS agreement is identified as a security pact, an alliance, and a 'partnership' seemingly interchangeably – including in government documents. See HM Government, 'UK, US and Australia Launch New Security Partnership', 15 September 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-us-and-australia-launch-new-security-partnership>, accessed 31 May 2022.
18. Robert Jervis, 'Deterrence Theory Revisited' [Review of *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, by A George and R Smoke], *World Politics* (Vol. 31, No. 2, 1979), p. 292.
19. *Ibid*.
20. Justin V Anderson and Jeffrey A Larsen with Polly M Holdorf, 'Extended Deterrence and Allied Assurance: Key Concepts and Current Challenges for US Policy', INSS Occasional Paper, September 2013, <https://www.usafa.edu/app/uploads/OCP69.pdf>, accessed 15 December 2022.
21. Keith B Payne, 'On Nuclear Deterrence and Assurance', *Strategic Studies Quarterly* (Vol. 3, No. 1, 2009), pp. 43–80, p .46.
22. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, p. 6.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
24. I thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for pointing this out.

between the UK's rhetoric and its capabilities, the specificity that is provided unhelpfully exacerbates the ambiguity of the objectives.

One example is that of the AUKUS security pact, whose shortcomings are highlighted in a recent House of Commons report:

> A major part of the agreement is for the three countries to begin consultations to help Australia acquire nuclear-powered (not nuclear-armed) submarines. The initial scoping phase for this part of the agreement will take 18 months:
>
> The development of Australia's nuclear-powered submarines would be a joint endeavour between the three nations, with a focus on interoperability, commonality, and mutual benefit.[...]
>
> The statement also announces plans for further collaboration to "enhance our joint capabilities and interoperability." These will initially focus on cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and additional undersea capabilities.[25]

The above extract identifies a series of ambitions for collaboration, but the details of these collaborations remain sparse. One area in the agreement where there is a lot of detail is on the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information,[26] signed by the parties in November 2021. The document is limited to the exchange of propulsion information rather than the broader objectives of artificial intelligence, quantum and undersea capabilities. Hence, there is a discrepancy between the assurance being promised in public statements on the agreement and the actual details therein.

This may be a short-term problem, while the governments rally domestic support and develop the details of the security pact and how to formally achieve it. However, the difficulty is that while this process is underway, it is creating a regional backlash including in states such as Malaysia and Indonesia where there are concerns that the agreement will generate a region-wide arms race.[27]

Similarly, concerns have been raised in Japan about the development of the AUKUS agreement, and particularly Japan's exclusion from it; years after the announcement of the three-way agreement there is now a swathe of reports indicating that AUKUS could become JAUKUS.[28] Even without this level of agreement, ties between the UK and Japan have become closer, including joint exercises in the English Channel in November 2022 and the signing of an access agreement between the two states.[29] These discussions demonstrate that this group of states are developing closer ties, and that there is a gradual 'beefing up' of the relationship between the UK and Japan. However, there is a central problem: Japan is not in the Five Eyes intelligence sharing community and there is little prospect for it becoming involved – thus, even if it were to become involved in AUKUS, it may not be able to do so as a 'full' member.

An underrecognised concern is how this agreement might interact with other existing regional frameworks, such as the 1971 Five Powers Defence Agreement (FPDA) between Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Singapore and the UK. This agreement commits the participants to consult if either Malaysia or Singapore were attacked.[30] Although the agreement is not a formal defence arrangement and only commits members to consultation, it does bring together the five states, provides valuable access to bases, and enables wider strategic oversight of activities across southeast Asia[31] – in particular

25. Brooke-Holland, Curtis and Mills, 'The AUKUS Agreement', p. 5.
26. HM Government, *Agreement Between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Government of Australia, and the Government of the United States of America for the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information* (London: The Stationery Office, 22 November 2022).
27. Brooke-Holland, Curtis and Mills, 'The AUKUS Agreement', p. 67.
28. See for example, Maria Siow, 'Japan Joining Aukus: The "Logical Choice", But Would It Be a Full Partner in the Alliance?', *South China Morning Post*, 27 November 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3200963/japan-joining-aukus-logical-choice-would-it-be-full-partner-alliance>, accessed 14 December 2022; Stephen Dziedzic and James Oaten, 'Australia's "Indispensable" Partnership with Japan Could See It Join AUKUS Pact as Strategic Links Grow', *ABC News*, 9 December 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-12-09/aukus-australia-japan-richard-marles-pact/101757248>, accessed 14 December 2022.
29. Michael Auslin, 'Why Japan Should Join AUKUS', *Foreign Policy*, 15 November 2022.
30. Euan Graham, 'The Five Power Defence Arrangements at 50: What Next?', IISS Analysis, 10 December 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/12/five-power-defence-arrangements>, accessed 18 January 2023.
31. Abdul Rahman Yaacob, 'Keeping the Five Power Defence Arrangement Relevant at 50', East Asia Forum, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/11/27/keeping-the-five-power-defence-arrangement-relevant-at-50/>, accessed 13 July 2022.

through agreements such as Operation *Gateway*[32] – to Australia, New Zealand and the UK. According to Euan Graham at IISS:

> The biggest risk in this regard is that Malaysia's commitment to the FPDA wanes because of a lack of political support, due in part to ignorance of the Arrangements. Malaysia hosts the IADS [Integrated Air Defence System] and most of the FPDA's major exercises. Without Kuala Lumpur's support, Australia, the UK and New Zealand would lose significant access for their armed forces in Southeast Asia, when the region's strategic importance is rising.

Malaysia, however, has demonstrated a lack of comfort with the AUKUS agreement, and the FPDA's importance is underplayed by both the UK and Australia. The AUKUS agreement also has the potential to exacerbate existing imbalances in defence capabilities between the parties.[33]

This presents a problem for the UK Indo-Pacific tilt. The Integrated Review states that the UK will 'adapt to the regional balance of power and respect the interests of others – and seek to work with existing structures such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).'[34] However, the UK's knowledge of both the historical relations and current political dynamics in the region seems to be a weakness, along with an awareness of how the region's security and defence arrangements work in practice. The risk is that the UK may disrupt regional balances having not fully grasped the importance of some agreements that ostensibly seem arcane or irrelevant.

## Regional Synergies with the UK's Interests and Values

The UK's approach to engaging in the Indo-Pacific is premised on engaging with partners who share 'our' values and interests[35] and potentially share a common threat perception; both of these supporting assumptions are problematic and arguably over-play the synergies which exist. This means three things: (1) statements of assurance may not produce the desired effect; (2) the perceived gaps between these values may render deterrence postures less effective; and (3) the UK may end up committed to positions that are not in line with its values and interests.

Examples drawn from Southeast Asia showcase the different commitments to democracy, human rights and addressing the potential threat from China. The Integrated Review highlights the need to work with Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Singapore.[36] However, it is important to question the extent to which the UK's interests are aligned with those of these states. Vietnam remains a communist state. Although considered the 'poster child of liberal economic reforms' (and therefore an excellent potential trading partner) Matteo Migheli noted in 2012 that: 'the current economy of the country is still far from being fully liberalised [...] For example, 70% of the exports of rice (the dominant crop in Vietnam) are in the hands of Vinafood, a state company'.[37] According to Bill Hayton:

> Vietnam's success is far from being a triumph of World Bank Orthodoxy. Some might snigger at the official description of a 'socialist-oriented market economy' but it's not an empty slogan. Even today the Communist Party retains control over most of the economy, either directly through the state-owned enterprises which monopolise key strategic sectors, through joint venture between the state sector and foreign investors, or, increasingly, through elite networks which bind the Party to the new private sector.[38]

Therefore, although Vietnam is a member of the CPTPP, it is far from clear that it is a partner with strong economic synergies with the UK or with the rules-based liberal order.

In terms of human rights and political freedoms, the state and the communist party continue to impose significant limitations on freedom of expression and association, and Human Rights

32. Australian Government Department of Defence, 'Operation *Gateway*', <https://www.defence.gov.au/operations/gateway-south-china-sea-and-indian-ocean>, accessed 13 July 2022.
33. *Ibid*. See also Graham, 'The Five Power Defence Arrangements at 50'.
34. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, p. 14.
35. *Ibid*., p. 66.
36. *Ibid*., p. 62.
37. Matteo Migheli, 'Do the Vietnamese Support the Economic *Doi Moi*?', *Journal of Development Studies* (Vol. 48, No. 7, 2021), pp. 939–68, p. 940.
38. Bill Hayton, *Vietnam: Rising Dragon* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 3.

Watch identifies significant issues with human rights in the country.[39]

Similarly, there are both synergies and tensions over defence interests. Vietnam has a significant and ongoing maritime dispute with China in the South China Sea and has long harboured concerns about its northern neighbour. It has expanded relations with Japan, the US and Australia in the past decade. However, it also has historical ties to Russia which may influence its diplomacy. As Joshua Kurlantzick notes, of all the states in Southeast Asia, Vietnam is most dependent on Russia for its military supplies and procurement, and that may affect its ability to contribute to sanctions regimes.[40]

In considering this situation, Vietnam needs partners for hard security and strategic reasons, whereas the UK is seeking to ensure partnerships that are premised on common values and ideas. Hence the UK and Vietnam are focused on opposite ends of the geopolitical spectrum.[41] These differences may seem inconsequential at this stage of building relationships and deepening interactions, but they raise concerns about the credibility of the UK's rhetoric and commitments.

Similarly, the extent to which the values of a country such as Malaysia align with the UK is arguable. Under Matathir Mohammed, who was prime minister of Malaysia from 1981 to 2003 and from 2018 to 2020, the country developed rapidly at the same time civil liberties were being curtailed through measures including the Internal Security Act. Towards the end of Matathir's first term in office, the country made huge strides in consolidating its democracy; but it seems to have walked backwards in the wake of the 1MDB scandal (a massive fraud)[42] and the conviction of Prime Minister Najib Razak.[43] Malaysia's domestic politics continue to involve a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. As noted above, Malaysia does have strategic synergies with the UK, but it is not clear whether the UK's approaches will enhance existing frameworks.

In short, despite the clear benefits to the UK of narrating a foreign policy premised on, or even driven by, common values and interests, the implementation of such a policy will be more difficult to achieve because of the complex geometry of the Indo-Pacific, and the internal politics of the potential partner states.

A second issue is whether the states the UK is seeking to build partnerships with have the same or similar perceptions of the China threat. As noted in the AUKUS report published by the House of Commons:

> At a deeper level, Southeast Asian and American perceptions diverge to varying degrees on the question of exactly what threat China poses. While it fears a future of Chinese hegemony, the region has little appetite for the predominant US view of its competition with China, as part of a global battle between democracy and authoritarianism, a framing that was echoed in the AUKUS announcement.[44]

In many ways this should not be a surprise. In a report published in 2017 by John Blaxland and Greg Raymond, they found that in Thailand, the US was perceived as a greater threat to the region than China, although:

> 'language and doctrine favour US alliances rather than China'.[45] The authors argued that the US should 'modulate approaches for advocating on democracy' and that partner countries should do so in a way that is less likely to be construed as interference or taking sides. The focus should be on representations in private meetings and a broad program of engagement on democratic processes and principles'.[46]

A further point suggests that states should avoid zero-sum views (on Thailand–China relations).

The moves by the UK government to articulate that China is becoming more assertive and that there is an emergence, broadening and deepening of 'systemic competition'[47] in the region, all present

39. Human Rights Watch, 'Vietnam: Events of 2019', 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/vietnam>, accessed 31 May 2022.
40. Joshua Kurlantzick, 'Vietnam Caught Between the US and Russia on Ukraine', CFR blog, 21 April 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/vietnam-caught-between-us-and-russia-ukraine>, accessed 31 May 2022.
41. I would like to thank Professor Garren Mulloy for this point.
42. Hannah Ellis-Peterson, 'An Explainer: 1MDB Scandal Explained: A Tale of Malaysia's Missing Billions', *The Guardian*, 28 July 2020.
43. Rebecca Ratcliffe, 'Malaysia's ex-PM Najib Sent to Prison as Final IMBD Appeal Lost', *The Guardian*, 23 August 2022.
44. Brooke-Holland, Curtis and Mills, 'The AUKUS Agreement', p. 7.
45. John Blaxland and Greg Raymond, 'Tipping the Balance in Southeast Asia? Thailand, the United States and China', *Centre of Gravity* (No. 37, 2017), p. 14.
46. *Ibid*., p. 20.
47. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, p. 17.

significant challenges for the UK strategy towards this part of the Indo-Pacific. The UK sees this competition with China across multiple areas of engagement and multiple domains of threat perception – including non-traditional threats, traditional ones, and threats from 'new' technologies. The rhetoric of these speeches and documents then seems to be setting up an approach towards the Indo-Pacific that tends towards zero-sum engagement and leaves significant areas for ambiguity for potential partners.

## Analysing the UK's Position in Relation to Assurance and Deterrence

Why do the above points and differences present problems for the UK in relation to assurance and deterrence? The UK is seeking partnerships in the region rather than formal alliances. It is focused on becoming a deeply engaged, but not necessarily the 'most committed', regional partner. It is therefore appropriate to question whether the standards of assurance and deterrence should be applied to the UK's activities in this context.

According to Robert Jervis's 1988 approach to misperception, misperception can comprise 'inaccurate inferences, miscalculations of consequences, and misjudgements about how others will react to one's policies'.[48] Noting these risks, alliances are considered to be tools which can reduce the probability of misperception while maintaining a degree of strategic ambiguity – as such they rely on dynamics of assurance (of a particular set of actions and responses) and deterrence (the fear of the potential of a set of actions and responses). However, they are inevitably imperfect aspirations, as they are 'often incomplete because it is simply not possible to anticipate every potential incident covered by the scope of the promise'.[49] Furthermore, as noted at the outset, alliances require commitments to be credible. In previous works, credibility has been seen as synonymous with honouring commitments, but as Henry argues,[50] because of the interdependence of alliances, there may be times when one alliance is strengthened through the partner not being seen as credible to another ally. This article argues that the alliance concepts of assurance and deterrence are helpful in conceptualising the UK's engagement and its potential effects because of the role these concepts can play in mitigating misperception.

The most promising or successful alliance relationships are centred on specific, precise agreements, where there is a high degree of confidence that each side will honour its commitments.[51] However, this raises not just the question of credibility but the importance and challenge of developing strategic ambiguity. Glynn Snyder discusses Henry Kissinger's argument that it might be important for alliances to be both ambiguous and flexible:[52] if the adversary, or potential adversary, is unclear about whether the 'patron' in the alliance will provide assistance, and the degree or level of that assistance, then the adversary will be less inclined to act. Whereas if these elements are clearer or more specific, it may make it easier to plan and mitigate.

It is important to note that these two elements (specificity and ambiguity) do not operate independently. Indeed, a good alliance agreement will balance the areas where there is specification and the areas of ambiguity. It is this balance or 'duopoly' that creates the effect of deterrence. However, it is also this balance that creates the need for the 'client' ally to seek reassurance of commitments to assuage its fear of abandonment by its 'patron'. For the patron, the balance creates the risk of 'moral hazard'.

> The UK has not sufficiently engaged with existing frameworks in the region and, in setting up new relationships, has presented risks to these pre-existing links

## Conclusion

How, then, are these three concepts useful in evaluating the contribution of the UK to Indo-

48. Robert Jervis, 'War and Misperception', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Vol. 18, No. 4, 1988), p. 675.
49. Brett V Benson, *Constructing International Security: Alliances, Deterrence, and Moral Hazard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 2.
50. Henry, 'What Allies Want', pp. 45–83.
51. Benson, *Constructing International Security*; see also Glenn H Snyder, 'The Security Dilemma and Alliance Politics', *World Politics* (Vol. 36, No. 4, 1984), pp. 461–95.
52. *Ibid*., see also, Snyder, 'The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics', pp. 487–88.

Pacific security? The UK's approaches to East Asian states present a number of challenges, not least to the UK itself. The UK has not sufficiently engaged with existing frameworks in the region and, in setting up new relationships, has presented risks to these pre-existing links. This challenges the ability of UK deep engagement to 'deter'.

At the same time, if credibility is not wholly or exclusively concerned with honouring commitments but is instead a more holistic picture of understanding which interests and values will be the priority for partner states, then the UK's approach is problematic. It is not clear whether UK values will trump interests, or whether the hierarchy of values and interests is consistently held across different policy actors and different government departments in the UK.

In this context, there is space for the UK's current stance to effectively contribute to strategic ambiguity. However, as has been argued, the focus on values and interests sets up unnecessary ambiguity, where commitments appear to be caveated based on values rather than strategic objectives or material capabilities. This type of ambiguity varies in quality and effect among some states in the region – particularly in Southeast Asia – where alliances are needed based on strategic synergies, but where the UK is keen to forefront values. This ambiguity could be problematic and lead to questions surrounding the UK's commitment to key regional partners.

The UK's credibility problems are not being alleviated by current approaches, which are neither sufficiently reassuring nor capable of deterring. The biggest risk is that the UK makes firm, specific, strategic commitments to partners in the region, but that these are contingent on hidden or underspecified value claims. Hence, the UK's potential partners feel emboldened to act or respond to perceived threats, under the assumption that the UK will act. This then risks the UK being drawn into tensions – for example over territorial disputes. There is also the contingent set of concerns that supporting some partners for hard strategic reasons, versus supporting other partners because of value commitments, could lead to complicated and unclear webs that undermine the credibility of all commitments.

Overall, this presents a mixed picture for the UK's commitment in the Indo-Pacific. There are clearly some emerging and deepening bilateral relations, but there are also significant questions over the UK's ability to satisfy its own and its partners' expectations, which opens up the potential for wedges to be positioned between the UK and its most important regional counterparts. ■

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