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Singapore | 14 April 2022

What's Next for ASEAN-UK Dialogue Relations?

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ASEAN and the United Kingdom reaffirmed their relationship through a “Joint Ministerial Declaration on Future Economic Cooperation between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK)” on 15 September 2021. Photo: <https://asean.org/joint-ministerial-declaration-on-future-economic-cooperation-between-the-association-of-southeast-asian-nations-asean-and-the-united-kingdom-of-great-britain-and-northern-ireland-uk/>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The United Kingdom (UK) was accorded the status of Dialogue Partnership by ASEAN on 2 August 2021. With the UK as ASEAN's 11th Dialogue Partner, both the partners face the important task of establishing modalities of engagement and charting areas of cooperation across the three Community pillars.
- Beyond practical cooperation, the UK may have a greater ambition to explore strategic engagement with ASEAN.
- 'Global Britain' is the new identity that the UK post-Brexit seeks to assume on the global stage, and especially in Southeast Asia. The UK aims to raise its status in as many of the region's multilateral platforms as possible, and is "upping its game" through its increasing political dialogues, military presence, and socio-economic initiatives with ASEAN.
- While noting the UK's security interest in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN needs to continue serving as an anchor in the regional architecture through the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and to promote synergy through ASEAN-led mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom (UK) was accorded the status of Dialogue Partnership by ASEAN on 2 August 2021. Despite ASEAN having a moratorium in place on Dialogue Partnership since 1996, the decision was made given the UK's relationship with ASEAN on its own merits as well as its past cooperation and engagement with ASEAN as a member of the European Union (EU).¹

With the UK as the 11th Dialogue Partner of ASEAN, both the partners face the important task of establishing modalities of engagement and charting areas of cooperation across the three Community pillars. Beyond practical cooperation, the UK may wish to explore strategic engagement with ASEAN through ASEAN-led mechanisms, starting with an Observership status at the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus. ASEAN will have to find ways to allow meaningful participation from the UK in these sought-after platforms without further exacerbating major power rivalry—especially between the US and China/Russia—within these platforms. At the same time, ASEAN has to find ways to engage the UK meaningfully in its tilt to the Indo-Pacific while cementing its central role in the region.

This paper will examine the various dimensions of the new ASEAN-UK Dialogue Partnership and explore ways in which both sides may cooperate substantively in areas of mutual interest and more strategically in the Indo-Pacific.

SUBSTANTIATING THE DIALOGUE PARTNERSHIP

In substantiating the new dialogue partnership, ASEAN Foreign Ministers agreed to establish dialogue and cooperation mechanisms, namely the ASEAN-UK Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC), the ASEAN-UK Senior Officials' Meeting, and the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) Plus One Session with the UK, in accordance with the Guidelines for ASEAN's External Relations. These mechanisms will meet once a year and will allow ASEAN and the UK to review current cooperation, explore future areas of cooperation in strengthening the partnership, and exchange views on regional and international issues.

It is important for ASEAN and the UK to carefully chart out practical cooperation over the next five years, by building on the foundations of the UK's strong bilateral relations with ASEAN member states and in line with its priorities.

The Committee of Permanent Representatives to ASEAN (CPR) and the Ambassador of the UK to ASEAN have been tasked to draft a five-year ASEAN-UK Plan of Action (POA). The POA is expected to be adopted at the first Post Ministerial Conference Plus One session with the UK in August 2022.

ASEAN and the UK may consider some potential areas of cooperation in line with the UK's priorities in the region and potential funding sources available including a £300 million Official Development Assistance to support economic and social development in Southeast Asia.² Available funding³ includes the South East Asia Prosperity Fund,⁴ the UK's Newton Fund,⁵ the Fleming Fund,⁶ the International Partnership Programme, as well as specific programmes for ASEAN such as the ASEAN Economic Reform Programme (£19.7 million) and the ASEAN Low Carbon Energy Programme (£15 million).

Potential Political-Security Cooperation

The UK enjoys good diplomatic relations with all ASEAN member states. Having played a pivotal role in the establishment of many international organisations and being a member of the Group of 7 and Group of 20, the UK is well-positioned to work alongside ASEAN in promoting key values and principles such as a rules-based international order and multilateralism.⁷

As the highest defence spender in Europe coupled with longstanding bilateral defence relationships with most ASEAN Member States (including a support unit in Singapore and a military Garrison in Brunei), the UK is also well-suited to support capacity building and knowledge sharing in defence cooperation across the region.

The UK's extensive experience in combating transnational crime and cybersecurity—being the 3rd most powerful cyber nation in the world⁸ with an investment of over £1.9 billion through the UK's National Cyber Security Centre—will allow ASEAN to tap into its expertise in areas such as cybercrime, money laundering, and trafficking in persons through regular consultation with the ASEAN Senior Officials' Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC).

Potential Economic Cooperation

The UK was the second-largest economy in the EU before Brexit. It is also an important economic partner of ASEAN; total trade between ASEAN and the UK amounted to £36.2 billion⁹ in 2021 (to the end of Q3). Foreign Direct Investment to ASEAN stood at US\$7.9 billion in 2019.¹⁰

With trade being at the heart of Global Britain, the UK is working towards replicating some of the over 40 FTAs that it was previously part of under the EU, and a future FTA between ASEAN and the UK cannot be ruled out—especially since the UK is currently negotiating FTAs with Singapore and Vietnam.¹¹ The UK has also launched negotiations to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)—in which Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Viet Nam are members—and may consider acceding to ASEAN Plus FTA which has an accession clause, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in the future. However, the likelihood of an ASEAN-UK FTA¹² will depend on whether the level of ambition of the UK aligns with what ASEAN can accommodate.

Apart from further boosting trade and investment ties, the Joint Ministerial Declaration on Future Economic Cooperation between ASEAN and the UK, adopted at the ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM) – UK Consultation on 15 September 2021, has also identified several areas of cooperation such as (i) promoting economic recovery and supply chains resilience; (ii) promoting a multilateral trading system to strengthen commitments under the World Trade Organization (WTO); (iii) developing regulatory standards and systems; (iv) strengthening digital innovation, data governance and e-commerce under the ASEAN-UK Digital Innovation Partnership launched in September 2022; (v) financial technologies (FinTech) and green financing; and (vi) science, technology and innovation, among several others.

Potential Socio-Cultural Cooperation

As a global leader in diplomacy and development, the UK has established strong socio-economic and people-to-people ties with ASEAN member states through close historical links and various initiatives. This is particularly so in education with over 40,000 ASEAN students studying in the UK and over three million British visitors to the region annually. The *State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey*¹³ has also shown that the UK remains the region's second top choice in tertiary education after the US.

The availability of various funding sources set aside by the UK Government will enable ASEAN and the UK to enhance cooperation on a few key fronts including: (i) education and scholarships such as the Chevening Scholarship Programme; (ii) skills development including Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and English language training; (iii) health including joint research on COVID-19 and vaccines production; (iv) climate change; (v) humanitarian assistance and disaster preparedness including support to the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre); and (vi) strengthening people-to-people exchanges through tourism, sporting and exchanges in the cultural and creative sectors.

EXPLORING STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT

A Dialogue Partnership status with ASEAN will certainly be a stepping stone for the UK to seek membership in ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus).

With its global standing, the UK will most likely fulfil the membership criteria in all ASEAN-led mechanisms. The UK is a sovereign state (unlike the EU), a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN, and a High Contracting Party to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) since 2012. In addition, it has Embassies or High Commissions in all ten ASEAN member states and is able to contribute positively to regional peace, stability and prosperity.

However, the UK is aware that its membership in ASEAN-led mechanisms including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) will not be automatic and requires separate requests to be

made to the respective mechanisms. For over a decade, none of the ASEAN-led mechanisms has accepted new membership,¹⁴ observing a de-facto moratorium to ensure the effectiveness of the mechanism.

Furthermore, the admittance of new members into these mechanisms, particularly the EAS may require consulting with non-ASEAN EAS members following ASEAN's decision. The UK as a strong political ally of the US and a member of the trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS) could face some level of resistance from both China and Russia.

The challenge for the UK is further compounded by two longstanding Dialogue Partners—Canada and the EU—who have been requesting to join the EAS and the ADMM-Plus for several years, with no success.

However, despite these challenges, the UK has applied for an Observer Status^{15 16} for the ADMM-Plus Expert Working Groups (EWG) for Peacekeeping Operations and Military Medicine in 2018. The deliberation is ongoing with a decision expected to be reached in 2022.

While noting the UK's strategic ambition in the region, a common understanding between ASEAN and UK is the importance of substantiating the new dialogue relations before seeking additional membership. However, being aware of the UK's aspirations will help ASEAN prepare for future scenarios. ASEAN member states that have strong strategic and political linkages with the UK may also advance the lifting of moratoriums on these ASEAN-led mechanisms.

THE UK IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

In February 2021, the UK Government published a policy paper on “Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy”¹⁷ in a tilt to the Indo-Pacific.¹⁸ The review noted the Indo-Pacific region as being at the “centre of intensifying geopolitical competition with multiple potential flashpoints” such as the South and the East China Sea, nuclear proliferation, climate change and transnational crimes.

As such, the UK has vested interests and is increasing its defence and security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Beyond the UK's strong historical and naval ties with regional countries (including through the Five Power Defence Arrangement),¹⁹ the UK has also taken a stronger stand on the South China Sea²⁰ with several Royal Navy warships conducting freedom of navigation operations²¹ in recent years.

The UK's Carrier Strike Group,^{22 23} led by HMS Queen Elizabeth has completed a series of engagements with several ASEAN member states, with more planned for the future. The UK has also deployed two Patrol Vessels (HMS Sprey and Tamar)²⁴ for a five-year Indo-

Pacific Mission which can assist regional states (together with local navies) in addressing non-traditional security issues including drug smuggling and IUU fishing. A Littoral Response Group is also expected to operate in the Indo-Pacific from 2023.²⁵

The UK has highlighted that its future prosperity and security are increasingly dependent on developments in the Indo-Pacific, and expressed commitment to building partnerships across the Indo-Pacific region including with ASEAN – as mentioned eight times in its policy paper.²⁶ The UK through various platforms (including at the ASEAN and G7 Foreign and Development Ministers meeting in December 2021) has reaffirmed its support for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which envisages ASEAN centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

Apart from seeking closer relations with ASEAN, the UK has announced in September 2021 a new enhanced trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS) to help Australia acquire nuclear-powered submarines, and other security cooperation. While the initiative will help strengthen the UK's defence credentials in the Indo-Pacific, mixed views have been recorded in the region. According to the *State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey Report*,²⁷ 36.4% of respondents felt that the AUKUS arrangement will help balance China's growing military power, 22.5% opined that it will escalate the regional arms race, while 18% are of the view that it will weaken ASEAN centrality.

The assessment of AUKUS may be premature, but UK's resolve to work with allies and partners to build capacity and preserve maritime security in the region is clear. The UK's credibility as a partner of ASEAN can be enhanced by involving ASEAN in some of its strategic engagements and activities in the region. A good starting point could be through the four key areas of cooperation in the AOIP, including maritime, economic, connectivity and sustainable development.

CONCLUSION – WAY FORWARD

'Global Britain' is a new identity that the UK post-Brexit seeks to assume on the global stage, especially in Southeast Asia – a region growing in economic and geopolitical significance. The UK aims to gain status in as many of the region's multilateral platforms and at the highest level as possible. It is "upping its game" in the region by increasing political dialogues, military presence, and socio-economic initiatives with ASEAN.

ASEAN may tap into the strength and expertise of the UK in its integration and community building across all three Community pillars. The new Plan of Action between ASEAN and the UK, building on areas of mutual interest will further strengthen the Dialogue Partnership, once adopted in 2022. Strategically, noting the UK's security interest in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN needs to continue serving as an anchor in the regional architecture through the AOIP.

ASEAN may also need to find a roadmap to concretise the AOIP and substantiate key areas of cooperation that will allow like-minded partners such as the UK to meaningfully engage with ASEAN vis-à-vis their Indo-Pacific strategies. This will help cement ASEAN's central role in the Indo-Pacific region and promote synergy through ASEAN led-mechanisms.

ENDNOTES

¹ ASEAN, Joint Communiqué of the 54th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, 2 August 2022, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Joint-Communique-of-the-54th-ASEAN-Foreign-Ministers-Meeting-FINAL.pdf>

² UK Mission to ASEAN, <https://www.gov.uk/world/organisations/uk-mission-to-asean>

³ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, UK-ASEAN factsheet (updated 11 February 2022), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-asean-factsheet/uk-asean-factsheet>

⁴ South East Asia Prosperity Fund, <https://blogs.fcdo.gov.uk/southeastasiaprospertyfund/>

⁵ The Newton Fund builds outstanding research and innovation partnerships with countries in Asia, Africa and America. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/newton-fund-building-science-and-innovation-capacity-in-developing-countries/newton-fund-building-science-and-innovation-capacity-in-developing-countries>

⁶ The Fleming Fund is UK's aid programme supporting up to 24 countries across Asia and Africa to tackle antimicrobial resistance. <https://www.flemingfund.org/>

⁷ The ASEAN-G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting on 12 December 2021 was an example of the UK's role in bringing together like-minded partners to reaffirm key values.

⁸ UK Cabinet Office, Policy Paper on *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, 2 July 2021,

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>

⁹ UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, UK-ASEAN Factsheet, updated on 11 February 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-asean-factsheet/uk-asean-factsheet>

¹⁰ ASEAN, ASEAN Investment Report 2020-2021, September 2021, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/AIR-2020-2021.pdf>

¹¹ The Diplomat, Global Britain: Why the United Kingdom Needs ASEAN, 5 July 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/global-britain-why-the-united-kingdom-needs-asean/>

¹² UK's level of ambition in its potential FTA with ASEAN needs to be taken into consideration, particularly if it is ambitious and comprehensive. In addition to typical FTA clauses, the UK may be interested to include non-traditional value-based trade provisions such as human rights, labour rights, environment, fair and ethical trade, and sustainable development-related issues. ASEAN may prefer to keep these issues separate from FTA negotiations.

¹³ Seah, S. et al., *The State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey Report*, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/The-State-of-SEA-2022_FA_Digital_FINAL.pdf

¹⁴ EAS accepted the last two members, Russia and the U.S., in 2011. ADMM-Plus since its inauguration in October 2010 has not accepted any new members. Sri Lanka was the last member

to join the ARF in 2007. A moratorium on accepting new states was adopted at the same time and sustained at the 15th ARF Ministerial Meeting in 2008.

¹⁵ Since June 2021, the decision on new ADMM-Plus members or observers will be made solely by ADMM i.e. ASEAN member states, and not the plus-partners. Prior to this decision, the application of the UK, EU, Canada, and France has met some resistance from China and Russia.

¹⁶ Ian Storey and Hoang Thi Ha, 'Global Britain' and Southeast Asia: Progress and Prospect, ISEAS Perspective Issue 2021 No. 130, 1 October 2021, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_130.pdf

¹⁷ UK Cabinet Office, Policy Paper on *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, 2 July 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>

¹⁸ Lynn Kuok, From Withdrawal to Indo-Pacific 'tilt': Southeast Asia welcomes enhanced British security presence, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 11 August 2021, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/08/southeast-asia-british-security-presence-indo-pacific-tilt>

¹⁹ Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the UK.

²⁰ Ian Storey and Hoang Thi Ha, 'Global Britain' and Southeast Asia: Progress and Prospect, ISEAS Perspective Issue 2021 No. 130, 1 October 2021, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_130.pdf

²¹ East Asia Forum, Is ASEAN too 'Far East' or just right for Global Britain?, 4 June 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/06/04/is-asean-too-far-east-or-just-right-for-global-britain/>

²² Ian Storey and Hoang Thi Ha, 'Global Britain' and Southeast Asia: Progress and Prospect, ISEAS Perspective Issue 2021 No. 130, 1 October 2021, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_130.pdf

²³ The carrier group included Type 45 destroyers and Type 23 anti-submarine frigates, support vessels, a submarine, plus a Dutch frigate and U.S. destroyer. Aircraft included a mix of RAF/Royal Navy and US Marine Corps F-35 Lightning combat aircraft, Wildcat and Merlin helicopters.

²⁴ Relatively small and lightly armed, the Offshore Patrol Vessels will be less controversial than larger warships and are better suited for working with the navies of ASEAN member states which mostly operate similar-sized vessels. Their small size will enable them to visit a larger number of regional ports. In an era of great power competition, this arrangement avoids the political sensitivities associated with permanently hosting foreign warships.

²⁵ East Asia Forum, The United Kingdom's 'tilt' toward the Indo-Pacific, 18 June 2021, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/06/18/the-united-kingdoms-tilt-toward-the-indo-pacific/>

²⁶ UK Cabinet Office, Policy Paper on *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, 2 July 2021.

²⁷ Seah, S. et al., *The State of Southeast Asia 2022 Survey Report*, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2022, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/The-State-of-SEA-2022_FA_Digital_FINAL.pdf

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