

In March 2022, London and Washington agreed to deepen alignment in the Indo-Pacific to counter China. The [communique](#) underscored growing coordination among allies and security partners across the Atlantic and the Pacific and a commitment to coordinate Washington's Indo-Pacific Strategy with the United Kingdom's Indo-Pacific 'tilt' outlined in the 2021 [Integrated Review](#) and [Defence Command Paper](#).

The two countries currently prioritise existing alliances and partnerships to counter shared security concerns over Russia and China. At the NATO summit in Madrid, the alliance [emphasised](#) China's ambitions and growing strategic partnership with Russia as a threat to NATO's interests. In April 2022, an [AUKUS communique](#) reaffirmed London, Washington and Canberra's commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific while underscoring security concerns over Russia.

The United Kingdom and the United States prioritise these arrangements as they believe higher levels of strategic convergence and commensurate capabilities will produce more [tangible outcomes](#). But closer UK-US alignment also indicates that London will go beyond its Indo-Pacific tilt on paper, posing challenges for UK policymakers in balancing their interests in Southeast Asia.

Many aspects of the Indo-Pacific tilt [focus on ASEAN](#). In 2021, London achieved a diplomatic milestone by becoming ASEAN's 11th Dialogue Partner. The first ASEAN-UK ministerial meeting in August 2022 issued a [plan of action](#) to implement this partnership by deepening trade, investment, defence and security cooperation. Recent data [suggests](#) that the United Kingdom is becoming a more trusted 'third party' among ASEAN members for hedging against the US-China strategic rivalry.

The United Kingdom meanwhile also deepened its security and defence relations with US allies and Quad members beyond the United States and Australia. In 2021, Tokyo and London [committed](#) to a closer maritime defence and security cooperation. The United Kingdom also signed a [framework](#) for strengthening security and defence relations with India until 2030.

From an ASEAN perspective, intensifying US-China rivalry poses major risks to regional stability and prosperity. Despite ASEAN centrality rhetoric, US-China competition is challenging ASEAN unity and its centrality in the wider regional architecture. Concerns about the Quad's role [alongside](#) ASEAN may have [eased](#) but they have not entirely dissipated. While there is [no ASEAN consensus](#) over AUKUS, Indonesia and Malaysia see the pact as possibly [precipitating an arms race](#).

How Southeast Asia assesses London's contribution to regional stability will depend on whether its involvement lowers or heightens the risk of great power confrontation. ASEAN countries will also look carefully at how London accommodates their preferences regarding Russia and China. Jakarta's assessment is particularly important considering Indonesia will be ASEAN Chair in 2023.

London [reaffirmed](#) its condemnation of Russian belligerence at the August 2022 UK-ASEAN ministerial meeting. ASEAN, on the other hand, has weaved a [middle ground](#) by emphasising the importance of an immediate cessation of hostilities and the creation of an enabling environment for peaceful conflict resolution. Indonesia — the current G20 chair — invited both Ukraine and Russia to attend the G20 summit, while the United Kingdom [believes](#) Russia has 'no moral right' to attend.

Past UK policy resembled key ASEAN countries that simultaneously engage China for economic benefit and resist its assertiveness in the South China Sea. Former chancellor and prime ministerial candidate, Rishi Sunak, briefly led efforts to [reengage](#) Beijing in early 2022, only for former prime minister Boris Johnson to suspend talks after suffering political backlash.

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the United Kingdom is embracing a harder approach vis-à-vis China and to existing conflicts in the Indo-Pacific. Sunak [labelled](#) China the 'biggest long-term threat to Britain'. UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss — Sunak's opposition in the prime ministerial race — favours '[a global NATO](#)'. She also declared that the United Kingdom should provide Taiwan with defensive weapons, before [stumbling](#) on whether this was official policy.

While London [recognises](#) the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China, Truss unambiguously backed US House of Representatives Speaker [Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan](#) and described China's response as 'inflammatory'. As Prime Minister, Truss will reopen the UK's Integrated Review and formally classify China as a [threat](#) to national security.

The possibility of the next UK government strengthening relations with Taipei to align with the United States in the Indo-Pacific would amplify ASEAN concerns, considering member states engage in far less provocative behaviour. While the United Kingdom and the United States are rhetorically committed to ASEAN centrality, closer alignment between the two countries makes it less likely that London will carefully balance the demands of US alignment with ASEAN's interests.

From a Southeast Asian viewpoint, the United Kingdom's comfort with US hegemony is understandable. But time will tell whether strong support for Washington's China strategy will strengthen London's relations in Southeast Asia.

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