

COMMANDER'S PAPER



# To what extent should the UK's Armed Forces once again be prepared to operate routinely east of Suez?

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## Disclaimer

The views in this paper are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Army, nor the UK Command and Staff College, or the UK or Australian Governments more broadly.

## Abstract

This paper examines whether and to what extent the UK's armed forces should again be prepared to operate east of Suez. The Wilson's Government's 1967 declaration of withdrawal from Singapore and Malaysia arguably signalled the end of Britain's role in the Far East and prompted claims of abandonment by its former dominions. Yet the UK retained a persistent link with its former Commonwealth dependencies through the Five Powers Defence Arrangements (FPDA).

The paper argues that in the current regional environment, which includes both instability as well as increasing prosperity and trade opportunities, this connection remains important to the UK. However, clarity is needed on what the UK would hope to achieve through re-engagement with the Far East, particularly post-Brexit. The paper concludes that the UK armed forces can play an important role in the region, particularly among ASEAN members, not least by contributing to confidence-building measures and through continuing and active participation in FPDA.

# To what extent should the UK's Armed Forces once again be prepared to operate routinely east of Suez? <sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Come you back, you British soldier; come you back to Mandalay!<sup>2</sup>

For more than three centuries, the Far East held a unique place in the British Empire as a source of wealth and as a base for power and influence. Protecting these interests eventually led to a vast chain of naval bases and garrisons from Suez in the west to Hong Kong in the east; commonly described as the 'east of Suez' role.<sup>3</sup> As the hegemon in the Far East until World War 2, the UK ensured the stability, prosperity and integrity of its territories, colonies and dominions. Following the war, the UK would regain its territories and colonies (less the Indian sub-continent) but lose its supremacy as the more powerful US ascended. Nevertheless, the UK retained an influential legacy in the Far East that shaped both domestic and international perceptions of Britain's power.

Underpinning this legacy, and thus providing post-war security to the Commonwealth nations of Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, were the key British military bases in Singapore and Malaysia. Yet British power was undoubtedly in decline—realised in the contentious decision of 1967 to militarily withdraw from east of Suez. Britain then lost the last vestiges of empire and seemingly turned away from its role of protector of the region, although this is perhaps too hasty a conclusion. The British legacy that remained was not mere ancestry and values but an under-valued security structure that still provides utility today in the form of the Five Powers Defence Arrangements (FPDA).

In the current environment of rising tensions within the Far East, the value of the FPDA link rightly poses questions of the UK government and its military planners to consider a more committed return to the region. Yet there are considerable strategic issues to contend with before any commitment could be made—where would it fit into official UK policy, noting UK obligations to NATO; how would British re-engagement be received regionally and internationally; and what benefits could it bring to the UK following the austerity cuts imposed by the *Strategic Defence and Security Review* of 2010?<sup>4</sup> Unsurprisingly, similar considerations shaped the British decision to withdraw from east of Suez nearly 50 years ago.

Regardless of the answers to these dilemmas, the Far East is again growing in importance to the UK and the world, with many commentators referring to the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the 'Asian century'.<sup>5</sup> Trade opportunities are flourishing, territorial disputes in the South China Sea threaten to spiral out of control and the UK's closest ally, the US, has stated its intent to re-balance to the region. Undoubtedly, a UK decision to return would face many hurdles but opportunities abound, especially after the Brexit decision. There are also arguments that a partial return is already underway. Conversely, there are arguments that a withdrawal never occurred in the first place.

This paper seeks to explore whether the UK's armed forces should once again operate routinely east of Suez, and specifically, in the Far East. The question will be answered in three parts. Firstly, the reasons behind the UK's so-called 'withdrawal' east of Suez will be examined to set the context behind a perceived return. Secondly, and with reference to such a return, the debate surrounding the UK's current national strategy and its desire to reinvigorate its global role will be discussed. Thirdly, the factors that influence a UK military presence will be explored, including trade, stability and diplomacy, especially with regards to regional perceptions. Throughout, proposals will be made regarding future UK engagement in the region.

As the Far East becomes strategically more important to the UK, an Australian perspective will be included, not solely because of the author's nationality but also because of the close ties that remain with the UK from the east of Suez era. For the purposes of this paper, the UK-centric term 'the Far East' will be used interchangeably with the more geographic terms Southeast Asia, Asia-

Pacific and Indo-Pacific. This particularly recognises the influence that nations such as US, China, Japan and India have on the region.

## Part 1: Was there an east of Suez withdrawal?

Any discussion proposing a UK military return east of Suez needs to start with a critical review of why, and indeed whether, the UK withdrew its forces from the region in the first place. These questions are important because, as Jeffrey Pickering argues, the UK has a history of over-extension and yet retains an ambitious view of its role in the world, as declared in the 2010 *National Security Strategy* (and reinforced in the 2015 iteration).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, there were strong calls in the 1960s and 70s from its former dependencies and from its most important ally, the US, for the UK to stay in the region. Why would so much influence and credibility be forsaken?

The 'dilemma of overextension' has long been a thorny issue for British military planners, especially since the end of World War 2 when the UK regained its former colonies and territories. With a crushing post-war debt, Pickering has argued that from 1945 Britain could neither afford nor adequately satisfy such an enormous responsibility. Saki Dockrill concurs and emphasises the efforts that successive British governments made to simultaneously support interests towards the Commonwealth, Europe and the US.<sup>7</sup>

These interests were defined by three strategic goals, first defined by the Macmillan Government in October 1961 but also that successive British governments tried to sustain and balance, namely nuclear deterrence; the defence of Western Europe; and an influence east of Suez. Then Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas-Home would go on record in 1963 committing to this balancing act with his declaration that 'we have rejected the idea that we should choose between Europe and a world role'.<sup>8</sup>

However, the pressure from Treasury to reduce expenditure continued. East of Suez emerged as the most likely target, especially as the government transitioned from Macmillan's Conservatives to Wilson's Labour Party and its social spending agenda in 1964. Alluding to a reversal of Mahan's virtuous economic circle, it was argued that military spending cuts east of Suez could help bring the budget back under control and improve the economy.<sup>9</sup> In 1970, Phillip Darby strongly contested this link by suggesting that not only were the attempts to cost a military presence arbitrary—and to quantify economic value notoriously difficult—but that the relationship between the two was not exclusive anyway.<sup>10</sup> Rather, Darby argued that force had become merely part of the wider considerations placing 'order and influence over more specific national interests'.

Notwithstanding Darby's critique, economic factors were influential on the east of Suez decision. In the decades leading up to the decision, the value of Far Eastern trade declined while the Commonwealth's preferential trading system, the Ottawa Agreement, became a barrier to British membership of the European Economic Community (EEC). Having committed to the pursuit of EEC membership in 1961, Macmillan effectively instigated a gradual disengagement from the Far East in contradiction to Douglas-Hume's claims for a world role. As Stuart Ward concludes, this approach was disingenuous and unwelcome in many Commonwealth countries in the Far East, particularly Australia.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Pickering argues that from 1964, the new Wilson Government was determined to re-establish its financial management, and therefore political, credentials. Hence the primary pursuit of government policy was to continue Britain's currency dominance through maintenance of the sterling parity. However, this was by no means an easy process. The combination of a growing balance of payments deficit and international demand to replace the sterling reserve with a gold reserve would cast the east of Suez role as a casualty of the Government's single-mindedness.<sup>12</sup>

The run on the sterling in 1966 and the improved security situation in the Far East meant that the Government had a ready-made answer to stabilising the pound: reduce troops in Singapore and Malaysia, and the expense saved would benefit the balance of payments deficit.<sup>13</sup> However, the die was already cast for sterling and, despite loans from sympathisers in the international

community, by November 1967 the Government conceded defeat and devalued the pound, thereby ending Britain's currency dominance.<sup>14</sup>

Phuong Pham both counters and supports the economic arguments. In his view, the process of disengagement with the Far East began with British accommodation of Malayan nationalist movements from as early as the 1948 Malayan Emergency.<sup>15</sup> While this committed British and Commonwealth forces to a counterinsurgency role until the conflict ended in 1960, Pham argues that it also served to remind the US that Britain was active in the broader fight against communism, therefore avoiding the expense of committing forces to the Vietnam War. When independence was granted to Malayan states in 1957, followed by the proposed creation of a wider Malaysian Federation including Singapore and the remaining British territories in the immediate region, it was expected that direct administration costs would be reduced.

Additionally, Britain could retain its military bases in Malaysia and Singapore as part of its commitment to the Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement. As Pham argues, the outcomes were neither straightforward nor cheap. Internal politics fractured the Malaysian Federation, and Indonesia—under the banner of communism—launched its 'confrontation' policy to internally disrupt the new Federation. Britain was thus obliged to bolster its defence presence in Malaysia to deter Indonesian aggression.

Unsurprisingly, the prospects of EEC membership became far more enticing to the Wilson Government compared to a continued commitment to the Far East. Similarly, Dockrill contends that the mismatch of ends and means eventually forced the British Government to search for ways to reduce its east of Suez role, despite Harold Wilson's declaration that 'we cannot afford to relinquish our world role'.<sup>16</sup>

In support of a reduction, a 1964 Foreign Office study group concluded that while the Far East was important in the short term, it was increasingly less so in the longer term.<sup>17</sup> The group recognised that maintaining the Singapore base would exert influence on the US and resist communist influence in the region in the short term. By contrast, in the longer term, the end of the Indonesian confrontation and the US-led conflict in Vietnam would 'render the continued British occupation of the [Singaporean and Malaysian] bases unnecessary'. In comparison with Britain's other major defence obligations (NATO, the nuclear deterrent and the strategically-located Middle East naval base at Aden), maintaining bases in the Far East was deemed too expensive for only a small contribution to British trade.

The Foreign Office's study group was dissolved in 1965 but its recommendations lived on in the Defence Review Working Party. The view was advanced that large military savings could be made post-confrontation by 'liquidating [the UK's] current military forces in Singapore and Malaysia ... [and] by arranging for collective security with the United States, Australia and New Zealand'.<sup>18</sup> However, the Australia and New Zealand Governments remained firmly opposed to the proposed UK military withdrawal because, as Dockrill has argued, 'the defence of Singapore comprised the fundamental element in their defence policies'.<sup>19</sup>

As former British dominions, Australia and New Zealand were still culturally close to the UK, and maintained an expectation that the UK would assure their security. Moreover, Australian politicians were willing to exploit the tensions in the UK-US relationship to achieve this goal. Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt expressed the fears of many regional states by suggesting that a sudden British departure from the Far East might compel the US administration to reduce its defence role in Asia.<sup>20</sup>

Not to be outdone, the UK countered that if this security was still required, then Australia and New Zealand should help finance it through their own contributions, and by allowing UK forces to rebase in Australia. According to Derek McDougall, the Australian Government was reluctant to meet Britain even halfway.<sup>21</sup> Three factors influenced the Australians: firstly, the Australian public would rightly object that Australian troops were fighting in Vietnam while British troops were not; secondly, the Australia Government would be obliged to fund the new base at a cost of £100 million while anticipating the loss of preferential trade with the UK; and thirdly, by 1967 Australia was increasingly dependent on the US.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, Darby argues that it was the failed outcome of the 1956 Suez crisis and the UK's resultant 1957 Defence White Paper that played a major role in shaping future east of Suez defence policies. Following the widely-perceived view that the British failure in Suez was due to the failure of her conventional forces, Darby contends that British public scepticism grew over the military's value for money. Large conventional forces, especially the Army, were expensive—and when deployed became even more so as overseas sustainment affected balance of payments. A new approach was sought and Duncan Sandys, then Secretary of State for Defence, was granted wide-ranging powers to determine a new and more coordinated British defence approach.

Sandys' legacy would herald a reduction in conventional forces through dependence on the nuclear deterrent, greater mobility across the three Services, and a particular emphasis on air power. It was assumed that this approach would be cheaper yet still enable Britain to serve its east of Suez interests. However, Darby contends that these assumptions were mistaken and over-optimistic. Firstly, the faith in a nuclear deterrent was wrongly rooted in the assumption that tactical nuclear weapons would lead to manpower savings for limited ground-based conflicts. Secondly, the benefits promised by greater mobility could not be realised, as the military platforms were either unavailable or incapable. Thirdly, the expectation that air power alone could stabilise a ground-based conflict was disproven.

In support of the latter, Darby cites the Royal Air Force's approach to suppress an internal revolt in Oman. In July 1957, Britain intervened with air power to quell a revolt against the Sultan of Muscat and Oman. A week into the operation, it was realised that the air control methods alone were insufficient to deter the revolt and British land forces were subsequently deployed. In ten days, the situation was brought back under control, serving to remind the government that 'air power was no substitute for troops on the ground'.

Outcomes such as these served to strengthen the three Services' claims for more resources, and helped to shift government focus away from Europe to east of Suez, especially as the government refused to reduce its overseas commitments. In support of these claims, Darby offers the four renegotiated defence commitments Britain made with Malaya, Singapore, Brunei and Kuwait leading up to 1961; the Royal Air Force's increased strategic mobility capacity; the Royal Navy's and Royal Marines' growing amphibious capabilities; and the raising of the Army's recruitment ceiling to sustain the required overseas presence. Tellingly, Sandys' doctrine of mobility espoused in the 1957 Defence White Paper depended on overseas bases in order to fulfil the doctrine.

Therefore, Far Eastern bases such as those in Malaya and Singapore remained essential. This move eastwards also corresponded to a growing acceptance of a peacekeeping role, especially while a series of international crises broke out in Asia during the early 1960s. Again, Darby justifies this with reference to the highly-successful British intervention to quickly suppress a rebellion against the Sultan of Brunei in December 1962. However, if the peacekeeping role was accepted, so was the realisation that it was expensive and draining on the military's finite resources. Across all the Services, serious manpower shortages were experienced such that many units serving overseas were often critically undermanned and suffered retention problems.

The strain of the east of Suez role continued to build throughout the 1960s and, while successive Macmillan and Wilson governments declared their support for a continued world role, the caps placed on defence spending by Treasury ultimately took effect. Numerous major capability projects were cancelled, such as the carrier replacement, a fifth Polaris submarine, and eventually the proposed purchase of 50 F111 strike aircraft from the US. This last cancellation coincided with the Wilson Government's final acceptance that a global role was too expensive and the declaration in January 1968 that 'British forces would be withdrawn from the Far East and the Persian Gulf by the end of 1971'.<sup>23</sup>

### **Regional responses to the British announcement**

In tracing the emergence of an Australian strategic response to the British withdrawal, David Lee highlights the 'profound unease' that the earlier collapse of British power in Southeast Asia caused Australia towards the end of World War 2.<sup>24</sup> For a young and isolated island nation,

dependent on maritime security for its very existence, this unease was entirely understandable. According to Greg Kennedy, Australia relied on the Royal Navy to provide the framework of its maritime security until at least the 1950s, and actively campaigned for continued support.<sup>25</sup>

However, Lee argues that through a series of negotiations—that led to a regional defence organisation between the UK, Australia and New Zealand in 1950; the ANZUS Security Treaty between Australia, New Zealand and the US in 1951; and the US-sponsored Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) from 1954—Australia attempted to reconcile Britain's more limited 'Far East' strategy with that of the much broader US strategy of defending Southeast Asia.<sup>26</sup>

Accepting that Australia was not successful in this attempt, Lee notes that Australia ultimately rejected closer strategic ties with the UK in favour of equipment standardisation with the US—and what seemed to be a more certain guarantee of US support in terms of ANZUS and SEATO. However, this faith in the US to stabilise Malaysia-Singapore relations was misplaced. The US was embroiled in its war in Vietnam and, like the UK, expected Australia and New Zealand to take a more active position in the region.

For Australia, this proved a difficult proposition, especially while it was trying to normalise relations with Indonesia after Confrontation.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, Australian politicians would accept that the withdrawal of Britain and a distracted US meant that Australia would need to become increasingly self-reliant, prompting the 'defence of Australia' doctrine that dominated Australian strategy for much of the 1970s and 1980s.

Malaysia drew the same conclusions, although with far more reliance on the nascent FPDA. As Archana Sharma notes, Malaysia's path to independence was unusual in that its new leadership actively supported a continuing post-colonial British military presence, yet within a decade both sides actively sought to end the relationship.<sup>28</sup> Several factors were influential in this outcome. Firstly, the Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement, which allowed the continued British presence, was initially deemed essential to prevent regional instability.

The effective British responses to the 1962 communist-backed Borneo uprising and to Confrontation bear this out. However, Sharma also argues that the Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement and the formation of the larger Malaysian Federation in 1963 contributed to regional instability by instilling fear within the Indonesian Government of a resurgent imperialist Britain. Moreover, Malaysian leaders became concerned that the agreement might draw the country into Cold War politics through its partners' membership of SEATO. This was particularly relevant for Australia and New Zealand, which looked to the Southeast Asian island chain as a northern security buffer.

Secondly, discontent had grown between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, the two biggest components of the Malaysian Federation, which would lead to Singapore seceding in 1965, much to the dismay of the British Government. In its view, Singapore's secession was a betrayal of British support and a rejection of the stabilising aim of federation. Yet, as Sharma argues, it also paved the way for the British withdrawal as it fostered hostility from the Malaysian Government towards Britain over perceptions of bias towards Singapore.

Additionally, the end of Confrontation created a situation where neither Malaysia nor Britain retained a common enemy, allowing previously suppressed Malaysian discontent to surface. Finally, the British, who were keen to reduce their military footprint, sought a peace dividend with Indonesia through a proposed aid program. To the Malaysian Government, this appeared to sideline it as the chief peace negotiator and potentially divert the financial aid that it expected and needed to develop its own defence force.

The overall result was that by 1966, British and Malaysian relations soured to the extent that there were calls on both sides for British troops to be withdrawn. At Malaysia's request, the process began with the withdrawal of troops from Borneo (now East Malaysia) such that by April 1967 only 30,000 British troops would remain in Malaysia. By contrast, the announcements that all troops would be withdrawn from Malaysia and Singapore by 1975 greatly alarmed the governments of both nations and the realities of self-determination began to dawn.

The Wilson Government's subsequent announcement that the withdrawal date would be brought forward to 1971 merely reinforced this realisation. Like Australia, Malaysia accepted this new status quo with the proviso that a new security apparatus be formed from the remains of the now obsolete Anglo-Malaysian Defence Agreement. The Wilson Government agreed and thus FPDA was born, which will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

To summarise, the Wilson Government found itself at the end of a decades-long strategic conversation regarding the UK's east of Suez role, which had commenced at the end of the Second World War. In circumstances that look familiar to contemporary British strategists, successive UK governments held global ambitions yet struggled to afford the means to satisfy them. The pressures of maintaining a credible global defence presence against a growing demand for greater domestic welfare expenditure were exacerbated by several other factors leading to the 1967 decision to withdraw.

Among these were the Cold War pressures to maintain a hugely-expensive nuclear weapons program and the obligation to assist the US in containing communism throughout Asia, while maintaining a European presence. Britain also faced the challenge of preserving order in its former colonies while facilitating the rise of nationalism in the new states that replaced them. Internal pressures, such as the Macmillan Government's acceptance that the UK's economic future lay with Europe instead of the Commonwealth, and the 1966 sterling crisis, would exacerbate these external pressures.

Finally, the improved security situation in the Far East by 1967 and the mounting Malaysian hostility to continued British presence provided the Wilson Government with all the justification it required to withdraw. While the decision was unwelcome by Commonwealth countries in the Far East, it forced the nations of Australia, Malaysia and Singapore, in particular, to re-evaluate their place in the world and embark on a new era of cooperation, principally through FPDA.

### Countering the arguments of a British withdrawal

In his revisionist critique of the view that Britain had abandoned its 'extensive network of fuelling stations, dockyards, and military complexes' east of Suez,<sup>29</sup> Ashley Jackson argues that there was 'never such sharply defined breaks in British practice'.<sup>30</sup> He cites the ongoing defence obligation Britain retains for its overseas territories east of Suez and the basing arrangements Britain kept in Brunei, Oman and Singapore. He also disagrees with any notion that Britain's commitment to its overseas interests and territories declined, pointing out that the defence of these interests has always been a priority for British foreign and defence policy.

Moreover, Jackson maintains that a substantial British presence remained east of Suez region well beyond the 1967 decision. Instead of a withdrawal, he argues that there was actually a 'non-withdrawal' of British forces, whose role was to secure an area of key economic importance and calm the fears of nervous politicians abroad. He cites examples of this non-withdrawal as the establishment of the British Indian Ocean Territory to facilitate American responsibility for the Indian Ocean; the establishment of the Australia-New Zealand-UK Force following the departure of Britain's Far East Command in Singapore; and the regular naval deployments to the region that continue to the present.

Furthermore, Jackson notes that while the Royal Navy's reign of Singapore is long over, it still has access to refuelling and supply facilities at Singapore. Finally, he contends that the value of the British Indian Ocean Territory is underscored by the fact that Britain continues to stage its forces through Diego Garcia (in the Indian Ocean) to access Central Asia and the Far East in accordance with the Wilson Government's original intentions.

Another key aspect of non-withdrawal was FPDA. The Arrangements were created between Britain and her former dependencies of Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore in the same year that the British Far East Command departed Singapore in 1971. According to Carlyle Thayer, it was envisaged that the nascent militaries of Singapore and Malaysia would require time to build capability and capacity, and hence their development would be underwritten through support and training from Britain, Australia and New Zealand.<sup>31</sup> Ian Bellany refers to this

as Britain's 'out of area' role, a global role with loose connections to NATO objectives outside the NATO area, and a role that took a disproportionate share of the defence budget.<sup>32</sup> By 1974, the final infantry battalion was withdrawn, although the expected withdrawal from Brunei never occurred (and a Gurkha battalion remains stationed in Brunei to this day).

While the perceived value of FPDA has waxed and waned over the years, its value in the current Southeast Asian security environment is becoming more apparent and receiving the attention it deserves. Characterised by Thayer as 'the quiet achiever', FPDA has demonstrated a utility beyond its Cold War birth and has consistently evolved to meet new security challenges in the region, including 'terrorism, piracy, protection of economic exclusive zones, disaster relief and smuggling of illicit drugs'.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, as Tim Huxley suggests, it provides a hedge against a resurgent Indonesia and 'maintains essential channels of communication' between the sometimes mutually-distrusting states of Malaysia and Singapore.<sup>34</sup>

A paradox of FPDA is that while Australia may be the most active and supportive of the non-regional members, the most valuable member remains the UK. To justify this assessment, Huxley cites the benefits of Britain's 'continuing diplomatic and strategic weight', its membership of the UN Security Council, the nuclear deterrent and the brief recognition in the 2010 *Strategic Defence and Security Review* that FPDA is still in existence. Against the rising security threats in the region, Huxley concludes that FPDA is well-suited and remains a 'non-provocative form of hedging and confidence-building' for member states. Complementing this view is Thayer's point that FPDA neither overlaps nor competes with other regional security structures such as the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Similarly, Ralf Emmers' review of Singaporean and Malaysian perspectives of FPDA highlights the value of this particular multilateral agreement in the midst of the many other bilateral and multilateral agreements in the region.<sup>35</sup> Unlike Thayer, he argues that FPDA complements and overlaps these other agreements, from the dominant ASEAN-based agreements to the 'hub and spoke' bilateral agreements the US maintains with many Asian nations.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, he suggests that multilateral relations are gaining wider support within the region, as evidenced by the establishment of the Asia-Pacific Economic Forum (APEC) and plans to establish a common ASEAN framework for security, trade and society by 2020.

Regional terrorism and piracy have further raised the profile of FPDA, as has the Arrangements' ongoing BERSAMA LIMA series of exercises. This training serves two purposes, as Emmers notes. Firstly it has raised the professionalism of Singaporean and Malaysian armed forces personnel and, correspondingly, improved effectiveness in other agreements such as the Malacca Straits Patrol, a multilateral agreement between Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Secondly, it works diplomatically by allowing the British, Australian and New Zealand navies to operate in the Malacca Straits during exercises, an authority not granted to other non-regional states.

In summary, despite Britain's so-called withdrawal from the Far East in 1971, its commitment to FPDA has ensured its continued relevance to the region. While FPDA is not a guarantee of British security, it has generated confidence and flexibility in Singapore and Malaysia to adapt to the changing circumstances in the region. Moreover, with the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent reduced US military footprint in the Asia-Pacific region (before its recent pivot back), the region has seen the re-emergence of China as a strategic concern. In the absence of a willingness by the ASEAN states to commit to a security arrangement, Emmers argues that FPDA has provided Singapore and Malaysia with a valuable alternative for their collective security.

It may be said, therefore, that while Britain did withdraw from the Far East, in many respects it did not lose its influence or significance. Instead, it retained important links through FPDA which, importantly, facilitate physical access to the region. What does this mean for the UK today? Effectively, it means that Britain still has opportunities to influence the region should it seek to do so. Furthermore, its longstanding association with the Far East affords the UK a credibility within the region that few Western nations could ever hope to attain.

## Part 2: Strategic considerations for a UK role in the Far East

It is this credibility within Southeast Asia that the Government of Prime Minister David Cameron appeared to channel to overcome what he described in 2012 as a near 20-year 'era of benign neglect'.<sup>37</sup> However, debate continues over whether the UK can truly be a global actor and its re-engagement of Southeast Asia will be shaped by some key questions, including what is the UK's role within European collective security post-Brexit; how should it respond to the US pivot to the Asia-Pacific region and the rise of China; and is a global role affordable?

Furthermore, Britain's responses to the perceived threats to global stability, many of which exist within Southeast Asia, will define its claim to be a global actor. The parallels with the Macmillan and Wilson governments' dilemmas of the 1960s are striking: Europe or the Commonwealth; a global role or a European role; maintenance of the US-UK relationship; and trade versus affordability. Since the Brexit decision, it would seem that at least one of these dilemmas has been resolved.

The Cameron Government was keenly aware of these competing pressures, as first outlined in the UK's 2010 *National Security Strategy*.<sup>38</sup> It asserted that the UK saw itself as a centre of many global networks, a link between Asia and America, and influential throughout the world not least because of 5.5 million citizens living abroad and many millions more with British ancestry. It also highlighted Britain's membership of a network of 53 Commonwealth countries, and Britain's strong historical and economic links in the emerging markets of Asia.

Accordingly, it might be expected by many countries in Southeast Asia, particularly those with historical and Commonwealth links to the UK, that Britain would be increasingly prepared to respond to the high priority risks identified by the *National Security Strategy*, namely terrorism, cyber attack, international military crises, and major accidents or natural hazards. Of these, terrorism appears to be ever-present within the region, international military crises are seemingly existential with an increasingly-assertive China in the South China Sea, and natural hazards are a constant and often realised threat, such as the devastating earthquake experienced by The Philippines in 2013.

Arguably, this expectation is being met. The UK's official approach is articulated in the 'International Defence Engagement Strategy', which seeks to draw together foreign and defence policy to form the basis of Defence's contribution to UK influence.<sup>39</sup> Defined as everything short of combat, and often leveraging the UK military's historical legacy, 'international defence engagement' includes treaties and alliances, defence visits, defence sales and defence industry cooperation. The strategy makes clear that such engagement is prioritised and closely aligned to British government objectives.

Herein lies a certain link to a potentially-greater Southeast Asian role for the UK, as FPDA is specifically mentioned in the 'International Defence Engagement Strategy' as a valuable multilateral engagement forum, and an increased commitment is touted in the 2015 *National Security Strategy*.<sup>40</sup> However, this region is one among many that the UK appears to be interested in and, once again, like the dilemmas of the Macmillan and Wilson governments, it is difficult to determine how the current Government can afford to adequately satisfy all its strategic interests.

Regardless, there are numerous examples of opportunities for Britain in the Far East. For example, Ghazemy Mahmud highlights that Britain has a growing interest in the region and is looking to ensure that the region remains a stable and secure place for Britain to conduct business, citing the visits of former Cameron government senior leaders to numerous countries in the region as testament to this interest.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Michoto Tsuruoka recognises the UK's 'unique experience in and expertise on Asia due to its imperial legacy' and the value this has for the UK and Japan in both defence and security.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, Tsuruoka observes that the deep engagement that the UK has maintained in the region gives it primacy over other European states. In his view, it was this primacy that gave the UK the edge as one of the first European countries, beyond the US and Australia, to establish information-security agreements with Japan, and the first European country to establish a joint

research and development project in defence equipment in 2013. Tsuruoka argues that these new agreements build on the shared values of 'respect for the rule of law' and, significantly, the responsibility that maritime powers have for 'upholding the principle of freedom of navigation at sea'.

While Tsuruoka argues that a more prominent military role is neither sought nor expected for the UK in Asia, its expanding defence engagement within Asia in recent years positions the UK well to build on this role if required or requested. Furthering this argument, Mahmud highlights the importance of Britain's role in FPDA, described by former Defence Secretary Fox as the 'cornerstone of [the UK's] defence engagement in Southeast Asia'.<sup>43</sup> Mahmud's argument that this could be the vehicle for the UK to surge its presence was given weight by the re-assignment of HMS *Daring* from Exercise BERSAMA LIMA to provide humanitarian assistance to The Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan struck in November 2013.<sup>44</sup>

However, there is a healthy level of regional scepticism over the extent to which the UK's armed forces could actually shape events 'if things get out of hand'.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Rory Medcalf argues that while nations including Japan and Australia have embraced the return of the UK to Asia, there are questions as to what capability the UK can bring, given austerity measures and a lack of public interest in defence.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, aside from its defence diplomacy, the UK's strategic position towards Asia remains unclear to many nations in the region and appears vague when compared, for example, to France's 2013 Defence White Paper, which acknowledged that French 'prosperity is now inseparable from that of the Asia-Pacific region' and therefore commits France to contributing to the region's stability, both politically and militarily.<sup>47</sup>

Tsuruoka has argued that the UK must provide more certainty in its overall strategy towards Asia. Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton similarly argue that a new grand strategic narrative is required; one that leverages Britain's colonial past and the diaspora it created.<sup>48</sup> They intentionally shy away from a partnership with either the EU or the US and instead argue for a focus on the 'networks and peoples across the global north and south'. That would be a departure from any post-colonial mentality that assumed continuing access to the material advantages of Britain's former imperial past.

Instead, Barkawi and Brighton advocate an approach which recognises that Britain is no longer the global power it used to be but that the 'diasporic, transnational social relations of post-colonial Britain and the opportunities they afford for trade, business and influence' are still available to it. In this sense, Barkawi and Brighton advocate a defence policy that 'move[s] away from direct intervention ... and toward continuing and increasing the British military's advice and support programmes with foreign armed forces', as a means to gain more influence.

Aspects of the 'International Defence Engagement Strategy' closely align with this approach and it is evident that the current Government agrees with plans to 'make defence engagement a funded, core MOD [Ministry of Defence] task for the first time'.<sup>49</sup> Prior to Brexit, Doug Stokes and Richard Whitman contended that the UK and France were the strategic non-US heavy weights that were likely to develop a 'European grand strategy'.<sup>50</sup> They recognised, presciently perhaps, the somewhat awkward relationship that the UK has with Europe and its pre-1939 role as a European 'offshore balance'.

However, Stokes and Whitman also argue that the strategic drivers of the Arab Spring throughout the Middle East and North Africa, coupled with the US rebalance, have changed the 'systemic structural context of Europe's international relations', including that of the UK. Furthermore, they argue that the inability of Europe to formulate a grand strategy towards these problems enhances the value of the leadership that the UK could have provided pre-Brexit, at least from the US perspective.

Finally, Stokes and Whitman have argued that 'European strategic weakness in Asia has ... been interpreted as a strength for a broader institutional approach to the region'. Still, they claim that the UK maintains the desire and capacity for 'bilateral interoperability in military operations

independent of NATO' and a propensity to play a global role. However, they also accept that any move away from the EU will incur reduced influence over the EU, which could in turn devalue Britain's relationship with the US, leading potentially to the UK losing its 'tier one' ally status with the US.

Justin Morris argues that Britain is currently a far greater power than many would contend otherwise.<sup>51</sup> He suggests that many in the UK still believe that Britain is a great power and cites the influence this belief has over its foreign and defence policy. Borrowing Hedley Bull's definition of a great power, Morris argues that Great Britain is such a power, citing the usual facts and figures to demonstrate Britain's position in the world in economic, GDP and investment terms.<sup>52</sup> He relates the way that Britain used this status to invest in 'hard power', including the nuclear deterrent, to project military power especially through the Royal Navy and its extensive intelligence capability. On these two measures, simple criticism is evident: when would the UK ever use its nuclear deterrent without US approval; secondly, does the Royal Navy have sufficient platforms to project the power that Morris claims the UK has?

Regardless, Morris promotes Britain's contribution to international aid, which is second only to the US. Furthermore, Britain's hard power is equally supported by its soft power, whether through the global dominance of the English language, the influence of the Westminster system of government and British culture, and its deep involvement in numerous global institutions. Finally, Morris points to several conflicts in the last two decades where Britain played either a major role or took the lead in international interventions. Yet it could also be argued that this very claim to greatness was undermined when in 2013 the House of Commons rejected a proposed British intervention in the Syrian conflict.<sup>53</sup>

Referring to former Foreign Secretary William Hague's optimistic outlook on how Britain could reclaim its former glory, Morris points to Hague's commitment to NATO over the EU, his move to recentralise the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in decision-making, and his commitment to the 'broadening of Britain's alliance network', especially with the Commonwealth, Japan, the Gulf and North Africa.

This apparent east of Suez approach would be supported by borrowing from Mahan's virtuous circle, whereby government budget cuts and policy changes would enable the economic recovery required to commit to major defence acquisition in the future—indeed, this was recognised in the 2010 *National Security Strategy* and triumphantly proclaimed by Cameron in the 2015 *National Security Strategy* as a success for future procurement. In the meantime, budgetary cuts have hit the British forces hard, leading to speculation that Treasury was defining military capability instead of policy.<sup>54</sup> Acknowledging all of these points, Morris concludes that Britain can only realistically be viewed as a great power if it chooses to use the substantial resources at its disposal.

Likewise, Hew Strachan questions the legitimacy of the UK's global ambition, which he argues is mismatched with the 'ends' available to deliver it.<sup>55</sup> Where, he asks, should the Royal Navy concentrate its efforts given a lack of platforms? Against the well-understood value of maintaining a presence in the North Sea, Atlantic, Mediterranean, Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, Strachan queries British strategic interests in the South Atlantic and Asia-Pacific region. To underscore the commitment to the Persian Gulf, a new UK Maritime Component Command complex was recently constructed in Bahrain. According to the Royal Navy, '[n]owhere else outside UK home waters is there such a concentration of the Royal Navy around the clock 365 days a year'.<sup>56</sup>

Noting this commitment, Gareth Stansfield and Saul Kelly's critique of the increased British presence in the Persian Gulf, itself a component of the historical and now present east of Suez role, is relevant.<sup>57</sup> Their concluding question, 'what is the strategic purpose of the return "east of Suez"?', directly reflects the uncertainty of British strategy and the means to execute it. With only a limited tri-Service presence in the Gulf, it is argued that this British commitment amounts to tokenism of the sort that neither acts as a deterrent nor allows proactive engagement.

Furthermore, while the UK is diplomatically aligned with the US, Strachan implies that it does not automatically follow that the UK should follow the US pivot into the Pacific Ocean, even if requested. By example, he cites Britain's rejection of US calls for military support during the Vietnam War in 1965, where not even a single UK battalion was deployed. However, while the US has not officially requested UK support, and currently has no reason to do so, the US position is that '[its] relationships with Asian allies and key partners are critical to the future stability and growth of the region'.<sup>58</sup> This position matters to the UK because it bears similarity to the UK national security task to '[t]ackle at root the causes of instability', many of which are present in the Far East.<sup>59</sup>

Clive Blount concurs and argues that the region poses strategic challenges for the UK because of its perceived close relationship with the US and the significance of the Asia-Pacific region to UK interests.<sup>60</sup> In this context, Blount poses three strategic challenges for the UK to consider: how to mitigate the affect of the US pivot on European defence; how to utilise the existing UK defence presence in the Asia-Pacific region; and how the stretched and shrinking British Armed Forces can achieve interoperability with the ever-advancing US military.

Before Brexit, Blount posited that the UK could play a leadership role within the EU. However, this role is now more akin to the pre-1939 'offshore balance' suggested by Stokes and Whitman. In addition to leveraging British membership of FPDA and the Commonwealth, Blount offers the usual line-up of British facilities in the Indo-Pacific, namely Diego Garcia and the Singaporean refuelling berth, as a means to assist the US in the region. Finally, while he acknowledges the difficulty in retaining interoperability with the US, Blount argues that Britain's niche capabilities, including its special forces and the 'Five Eyes' relationship, remain important assets.

Given the above arguments and challenges to a greater UK engagement of Southeast Asia, it is no wonder that the strategic direction may seem confused or uncertain by many. There is no doubt that the Cameron Government's agenda for Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific region was to generate prosperity and stability to the benefit of the UK. However, what is unclear is the extent to which the UK will involve itself militarily within the region, given its resource limitations and competing pressures elsewhere.

Following the waves of austerity measures that were placed on the UK military since the 2010 *Strategic Defence and Security Review*, Tim Ripley anticipated budgetary stability and reduced operational tempo in the lead-up to the 2015 review.<sup>61</sup> To some extent, this stability was realised when the government committed to a defence budget of 2 per cent of GDP and the acquisition of more combat aircraft, new carriers and maritime patrol aircraft to create two new rapidly-deployable strike brigades.<sup>62</sup>

But with each of the Services now maintaining an east of Suez commitment, can all of Britain's defence commitments be sustained or are we seeing another period of strategic overreach?<sup>63</sup> For now, there are no clear answers. Regardless, the second-order consideration of integration into Southeast Asian security structures should also be considered. Importantly, would greater British involvement be welcome in the region given the underlying tensions?

### ASEAN perceptions of British re-engagement

Much has already been said about the UK's involvement with FPDA, which clearly remains a useful vehicle for deeper UK military engagement. Yet within the Southeast Asian region, it has been argued that external state actors are as much a cause of instability as they are for stability.<sup>64</sup> This was certainly the regional perception in 1967 when Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and The Philippines founded ASEAN. At that time, Britain's so-called military withdrawal had already been announced, thereby undermining the trust placed in it to provide stability. Sino-Soviet competition for influence within the region was also intensifying and the US was heavily engaged in the Vietnam War. The subsequent US withdrawal from Vietnam further undermined 'great power' credibility, and ASEAN leaders realised that an impending power vacuum needed to be filled.<sup>65</sup>

However, the ASEAN leadership also perceived common internal threats to their respective sovereign interests. As Rizal Sukma and K.S. Nathan contend, these included concerns for the preservation of independence; the primacy of regime legitimacy and the role of the state in the provision of security and prosperity; and the importance of internal order to ensure domestic prosperity.<sup>66</sup> Unsurprisingly, the three ASEAN norms of non-interference, avoidance of multilateral security pacts, and regional autonomy grew to define ASEAN's interactions with the world and among its members.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, despite numerous attempts, it was not until 1994 that ASEAN members accepted the need to establish a multilateral pact, the ASEAN Regional Forum, which now includes 27 nations from the Asia-Pacific region, including China, as well as the EU.<sup>68</sup>

The ASEAN Regional Forum's concept of confidence-building measures has proven to be highly beneficial to regional security confidence but as, Acharya notes, its informal nature—based on the so-called 'ASEAN way—continues to be easily exploited, with China, for example, managing to dissuade any ASEAN discussion of its territorial claims in the South China Sea.<sup>69</sup> Along similar lines, Allan Collins argues that China is able to exert 'de facto control over the discussion and implementation' of ASEAN Regional Forum policies, positioning itself as the benevolent hegemon in the region.<sup>70</sup>

Certainly, the ASEAN Regional Forum is not a military pact and its policy of non-interference inhibits ASEAN's effectiveness as a regional framework. That was most notable during the East Timor crisis of 1999 when ASEAN abstained from supporting the Australian-led intervention, notwithstanding the participation of several member states in the UN-endorsed coalition.<sup>71</sup> Yet there are signs that the ASEAN Regional Forum concept is having some success, and Sheldon Simon points to Beijing's 2013 concession to ASEAN to start discussing a possible code of conduct for peacefully managing issues within the South China Sea.<sup>72</sup>

John Lee similarly suggests that there is benefit in state participation in the various regional forums and agreements of Southeast Asia.<sup>73</sup> He cites the Australian approach to managing China's rise as an example. Lee observes that 'the messier the network, and more intricate the relations between Australia and the maritime powers in Southeast Asia ... the better the prospects for peace'. Here lies an opportunity for the UK to leverage its existing relationship with the region through its memberships of FPDA, in addition to the Ministry of Defence's ongoing defence engagement activities.

### The Australian perspective

The Australian perspective on Britain's apparent re-engagement of Asia-Pacific continues to be debated. Harry White has hypothesised that the UK Armed Forces are simply not up to the diplomatic rhetoric that claims a global role alongside the US.<sup>74</sup> Countering that viewpoint, Will Taylor has argued that unlike Australia, Britain can still muster strategic clout to make 'symbolic contributions' as occurred when HMS *Daring* was reassigned to conduct disaster relief in The Philippines in 2013.<sup>75</sup>

Officially, Australia recognises Britain as an important partner and this was formalised in the 2013 Australia-United Kingdom Defence and Security Cooperation Treaty.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, recent Australia-UK bilateral discussions mooted greater Royal Navy involvement in the Asia-Pacific region and an offer was made to utilise Australian military bases to facilitate this push.<sup>77</sup>

However, while the UK may be considered an important partner, Australia has not greatly shifted its alliances since the UK's withdrawal from east of Suez. As previously argued, that withdrawal encouraged successive Australian governments to forge greater strategic independence such that Australia began to see itself as a 'middle power', with the ANZUS Security Treaty as the 'core element of regional security'.<sup>78</sup> Regional partnerships with Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, The Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam form the basis of Australia's engagement with Southeast Asia, underpinned by FPDA. Therefore, while a greater British presence in the region may be welcome in Canberra, there is no indication of its size, frequency or extent, so in practical terms, its value to Australian defence planners is indeterminate.

Most important to all stakeholders, and especially Australia given its trade and security relationships, is the regional security dynamic generated by competition between China and the US.<sup>79</sup> As James Brown contends, 'defence planners must think through the future implications of Chinese aggression'.<sup>80</sup>

### The rise of China and US hegemony in Southeast Asia

The rise of China has attracted a great deal of academic attention and two main critiques are presented. The first, as John Mearsheimer bluntly states, is that 'China cannot rise peacefully'.<sup>81</sup> The second, through adopting a liberal institutional approach, is that China's rise can be peacefully managed. Offering a realist perspective, Mearsheimer argues that China's intentions remain unclear and that the US is unlikely to give up its regional hegemony easily. He asserts that Australia's perceived geographic isolation will not shield it from a more assertive China, predicting that 'China will maintain a significant military presence in the waters off the northern coast of Australia and maybe even on Indonesian territory'. As it happens, both predictions are close to being realised.<sup>82</sup>

For example, the sudden appearance in February 2014 of a Chinese naval taskforce conducting exercises in the Indian Ocean to Australia's north prompted surprise and concern throughout the region, but particularly within Australia and India. Medcalf notes that Chinese intentions were evident in open-source media reporting but it seems that the deployment was not officially advised to the Australian government.<sup>83</sup>

While the rationale behind the exercises is speculative, one explanation is that China, with a longer-term eye on the potential exploitation of seabed hydrocarbons in the Indian Ocean, was enhancing its understanding of the Lombok Straits, an alternative sea line of communication between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.<sup>84</sup> Others suggest it was a demonstration of Chinese force projection or the examination of an alternative trade route to avoid congestion in the Malacca Straits.<sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, in discussing the dilemma that the Chinese exercise created for Australian defence planners, David Wroe suggests that the 'view from the Chinese strategic establishment is that the region should get used to it'.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, reporting in China's *People's Daily*, citing official sources, serves to strengthen China's claim to a greater role in world affairs and reinforce its territorial claims in the South China Sea.<sup>87</sup> This rhetoric continues despite the Permanent Court of Arbitration's recent rejection of China's sovereignty claims.<sup>88</sup>

In contrast to Mearsheimer, Hugh White argues that given the importance of China and its perceptions of US dominance in its region, the US would be better off sharing its power with China rather than trying to contain it.<sup>89</sup> This, he suggests, could be conducted through a 'concert of Asia' approach, reflecting the 19<sup>th</sup> century concept of a 'concert of Europe', following the defeat of Napoleon. In his view, this formalised approach would offer greater stability than what could be offered by the existing regional frameworks.

Given White's critique, it could be argued that there would be merit in a deeper UK-Australia relationship as a means to offset regional perceptions that Australia is too focused and too dependent on its US alliance. Conversely, some could just as easily draw the conclusion that the region does not need the presence and influence of yet another external power potentially contributing to regional instability, as was the case at the founding of ASEAN.

Yet based on its recent defence budget cuts, one might conclude that the US is also in a period of decline and potentially unable to contain China's rise, despite its much-publicised rebalance to Asia-Pacific.<sup>90</sup> Equally, there are suggestions that the US pivot is as much strategic rhetoric as it is an actual increased military presence.<sup>91</sup> However, combined with the attempted expansion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership to the exclusion of China, Randall Doyle argues that the US strategy serves as a counter to Chinese ambitions.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, the US has the weight of a number of regional alliances on its side. Prior to its rebalance to the Asia-Pacific, US hegemony was already evident in its so-called 'San Francisco' system of bilateral relationships with South Korea, Japan, The Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand.<sup>93</sup>

In summarising this part of the paper, it is evident that there is a degree of uncertainty regarding the UK's strategic intentions in Southeast Asia, notwithstanding official commitment for greater involvement. The disparity can be explained by the competing roles that the UK is expected or obliges itself to play either as an offset to Europe, a reliable ally or as an influential but limited power in its own right. Moreover, it is possible that official UK strategy is deliberately vague so as to allow more political manoeuvring.<sup>94</sup>

Undoubtedly, this vagueness encourages questions of reliability and credibility from the perspectives of key Asia-Pacific states, notably Australia. Despite this concern, it has been argued that the regional security structures of the ASEAN Regional Forum and FPDA give legitimacy to British claims to cultivate a broader military role. Furthermore, any broader role is likely to be welcome in the region as the numerous renewed bilateral ties suggest. Finally, in the context of China's rise and the US pivot, it would seem that contemporary developments provide a timely opportunity for the UK to contribute beneficially to the already intricate network of security-related relationships within Southeast Asia.

### Part 3: Is there still a role for the UK Armed Forces in Southeast Asia?

Other than the possible alliance roles and the clear-cut opportunities that FPDA provides the UK military, are there other potential defence roles for the UK in Southeast Asia? The 2015 *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review* noted the intention to 'strengthen security and prosperity partnerships in the Gulf, Africa and Asia-Pacific', with plans to establish Defence staffs in these locations and create more training opportunities.<sup>95</sup>

The existing 'Five Eyes' arrangement, where the UK draws on shared intelligence provided by the US, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, negates the need for a routine UK intelligence-gathering presence in the Far East. However, Alessio Patalano asserts that there is one potentially-growing role for the Royal Navy in the region.<sup>96</sup> Arguing that interactions at sea are at the core of concerns in the East Asia region, he cites the Royal Navy's reputation for promoting 'good order at sea' as essential to delivering prosperity and prestige. This recognises that while the US Navy has historically ensured stability within the region, it is now on the margins of its capacity and could therefore benefit from the increased presence of an ally such as the UK, especially given the tensions in the South China Sea.<sup>97</sup>

Like many others, including the UK Ministry of Defence's *Global Strategic Trends*,<sup>98</sup> Patalano observes that the stability of the Far East is critical to global trade. Five of the top global trade routes originate in East Asia, yet all are potentially affected by contested territorial claims covering the rich hydrocarbon and fisheries resources said to be present in the South China Sea. On the one hand, China claims a great swathe of the sea on historical grounds, delineated by its 'nine-dash line' map.<sup>99</sup> But all the islands and features claimed by China are also claimed by at least one of the other littoral states, being either Vietnam, Malaysia, The Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei or Taiwan.

According to Geoffrey Till, these disputed claims are 'perhaps the most complicated, important and potentially dangerous ... in the world'.<sup>100</sup> However, without an established framework to ensure good order at sea, Patalano asserts that there is potential for uncontrolled escalation over these claims, especially as most regional navies are in the throes of a sustained program of modernisation. Accordingly, any escalation has the potential to interrupt freedom of navigation through East Asian trade routes.

Sukma and Nathan draw similar conclusions but attribute the instability to a lack of understanding of 'how China is going to use its new stature and influence in achieving its national interests and objectives in the region'.<sup>101</sup> Others similarly argue that China, with its growing resource appetite, 'has little choice but to become more maritime in its orientation [and that] ... almost inevitably, [its naval forces] will challenge the strategic primacy of the United States'.<sup>102</sup> Martin Jacques sees China's rise to prominence as a challenge to the Western system, demonstrating intent to define its own system based on the yuan as the major world currency and conducting business in Mandarin instead of English.<sup>103</sup>

Against this background, Patalano envisages a role for Europe, and in particular the UK, in encouraging the development of codes of conduct at sea and improved communication between potential belligerents. Such a role would likely have support from a number of East Asian states, as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recognised at a conference in October 2013 aimed at enhancing UK-Japan relations, when he drew attention to the historical partnership between the Royal Navy and the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) and their shared aim of 'maintain[ing] the safety of navigation'.<sup>104</sup> Abe further stressed the need to 'safeguard freedom of navigation and maintain the safety of the seas from the Straits of Malacca to the Indian Ocean and the Middle East region'.

As recently as April 2014, a code of conduct for Asia-Pacific waters was agreed between the member nations of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, which includes China, Australia and the US (but not the UK).<sup>105</sup> While the code is not legally binding and has no effect on any disputed claims, there is an expectation that the agreement should at least assist in ensuring that 'accidental naval altercations' do not escalate.<sup>106</sup>

### The defence trade role: supporting or supported by Defence engagement?

Another Far Eastern role that the UK Armed Forces now recognise is the defence contribution to UK influence through the promotion of Britain's defence industry.<sup>107</sup> According to Southeast Asia-based UK trade official, David Hatcher, 'UK security is best served by relationships' and it is the British Government's aim to establish long-term defence relationships with Southeast Asian countries.<sup>108</sup> This role is an obvious method to generate the prosperity and stability that the Cameron Government envisaged in its 'International Defence Engagement Strategy'.

At present, given its FPDA ties, the UK's defence industry is well positioned to build on its historical relationship with the Far East. For example, the defence technology company QinetiQ benefited from this relationship in 2004 in winning a contract to install an air command and control planning system at the Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Butterworth to facilitate FPDA exercises and operations.<sup>109</sup>

Another UK defence technology company, BAE Systems, leveraged the relationship in 2013 to establish a memorandum of understanding with a Malaysian industry group, 'pledg[ing] to strengthen its presence in the Malaysian defence market and to use the country as a base for further penetrating Southeast Asian markets'.<sup>110</sup> According to Jon Grevatt, the UK's relationship with Southeast Asian countries will continue to be important, particularly as this market grows and competition with other European nations increases.<sup>111</sup>

However, a former UK Chief of the Defence Staff has cautioned against overuse of Defence capability in support of defence industry, asserting that:

We must also be careful that the Defence budget is not disproportionately used to support British defence industry. There is a strong strategic case to retain specific sovereign capabilities in national hands; and there are very sound reasons to husband the ability to re-constitute specific capabilities nationally. But the Defence budget does not exist primarily to subsidise the defence industry or promote defence exports. It exists to maximise Defence capability. And it should do so in a way that recognises that our national defence industry does have a part to play as an element of our national hard-power.<sup>112</sup>

Clearly, it can be difficult to draw a distinction between the benefits gained from using military capability to promote defence industry and the benefits gained from Defence engagement. Arguably, the assets used for promoting defence industry could just as easily be used for 'upstream engagement', as Brigadier Kenneth Hunt observed while discussing the future British commitment to FPDA in 1971.<sup>113</sup> Hunt, in weighing up the issues of maintaining a British military presence east of Suez at that time, suggested that a small presence in an overseas location could influence the internal security situation merely by being there, and possibly negating the deployment of a much larger force in future.

General Sir Peter Wall, a former UK Chief of the General Staff, is also supportive of greater British Army involvement in defence engagement to gain both training value and associated funding, no

doubt mindful of the decision to withdraw the majority of the British Army from Germany and the negative consequences the decision had on training opportunities.<sup>114</sup> According to Wall, ‘the pilot schemes for defence engagement led by the Adaptive Force brigades ... are delivering valuable effect’.

Yet the resourcing issue is still contentious. Put simply, the British Army is being funded for defence engagement activities—albeit to achieve national strategic aims—that the Chief of the General Staff could be directed to resource from within his own assigned budget. The former Chief of the Defence Staff mentioned above cites the same dilemma at the joint level, noting that:

[W]e must find better ways of resourcing activity that sits in the grey area of conflict prevention and upstream stabilisation; or we will fail to monetize a huge national asset which can considerably assist the delivery of developmental benefits.<sup>115</sup>

Hence, while overseas training opportunities may exist through FPDA and other military-to-military links, if either Head Office or another government department does not provide funding, then in all likelihood the Service Chiefs may vote not to deploy forces to avoid the associated cost. As Hunt observed while discussing the similar post-east of Suez withdrawal dilemma decades earlier, ‘costs are more easy to quantify than benefits, and therefore easier to dwell upon, which is not necessarily wise’.

While the British Armed Forces should anticipate undertaking a range of tasks within Southeast Asia, from exercising with allies to supporting ‘good order at sea’, it remains unclear as to what ‘ends’ the UK seeks from these roles. The ‘International Defence Engagement Strategy’ may support the notion that all such Defence activities underpin UK influence, yet what is the UK trying to achieve, and what can it realistically achieve? It is clear that UK forces would be welcome in the region, as both Australia and Japan have indicated. However, competing interests elsewhere mean that a sustained and credible presence in the Far East is probably unrealistic.

Perhaps a more sensible approach is the strategy that Barkawi and Brighton propose. By accepting that it is no longer a global power, but rather a power with significant interests, links and influence throughout the world, the UK could re-align its mismatched ends with the means existent within the UK Armed Forces. This could include a naval fleet activity schedule that assigns a greater priority to the Far East from within the existing Persian Gulf operations. It could also mean that funding is committed for greater participation in regional exercises by Defence’s Head Office or the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Importantly, Britain’s ties to Southeast Asia through FPDA, the ASEAN Regional Forum and bilateral arrangements, especially with Australia, could facilitate an increased presence of its forces in the region.

## Conclusion

As Stansfield and Kelly have argued, ‘a “return to east of Suez” is an emotive phrase in British politics, on both the Left and the Right’.<sup>116</sup> Such a return, real or imagined, provokes similar emotions today. As this paper has observed, the reasons for the UK’s military withdrawal from Malaysia and Singapore in the 1970s were numerous, complicated and seemingly inevitable, in a way paralleling any major strategic decision taken today.

Major economic contributing factors to the 1967 decision included Britain’s post-World War 2 austerity, a growing balance of payments deficit, and the threat of a run on the sterling. The opportunity to address these shortfalls by shifting trading arrangements away from Commonwealth agreements to the larger markets of the EEC proved irresistible for both the MacMillan and Wilson Governments. It also signalled to Britain’s security dependencies, notably Australia, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and New Zealand, that significant structural changes were underway in the region.

Strategic factors were at least as important as the economic factors in the east of Suez withdrawal. Throughout the 1960s, it became increasingly obvious to successive UK governments that while a global role was desired, it was not viable given the more important strategic priorities of maintaining the nuclear deterrent and committing to European defence.

Other casualties of this mismatch of ends and means were the aircraft carrier and F-111 acquisition projects.

The improving security situation in Southeast Asia towards the end of the 1960s and the subsequent rise in nationalism, especially in Malaysia, made the final decision to withdraw easier to make. While not welcomed in any of the former British dominions, the effect of Britain's withdrawal was two-fold: it fostered greater independence for those states and, at the same time, greater regional cooperation especially through FPDA. Therefore, while Britain did withdraw from Southeast Asia it also retained a persistent presence to support FPDA exercises and the development of both the Malaysian and Singaporean defence forces.

Forty years later, FPDA remains one of the UK's most important connections to Southeast Asia as it looks to re-engage with the region. The reasons for such a re-engagement reflect the original factors that influenced the departure: trading opportunities are flourishing; the region contains many of the world's major shipping routes which the UK and many other nations rely on; and the security situation is looking decidedly more fragile than in 1971.

Yet the same debates still continue about what the UK's role in global affairs should be. Should it accept its declining global importance? Should it follow the US into the Asia-Pacific region as the supposedly reliable partner of a 'special relationship' when precedent does not demand it? Should it uphold the obligations of an influential power and commit to intervening in the Far East as the *National Security Strategy*, the *Strategic Defence and Security Review 2010* and the 'International Defence Engagement Strategy' suggest? Moreover, can the UK even afford to make more than a token gesture to the region, given the possibly more important strategic priorities in the Persian Gulf, the Atlantic and Europe?

These considerations are of major importance to Britain's long-time partners and allies in the Asia-Pacific region, especially while uncertainty looms over China's intentions. Australia, like its acceptance of the rotation of US Marines through Darwin, has offered access and training facilities to UK armed forces to facilitate a larger presence in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>117</sup> Japan has also called for closer ties with the UK.

The ASEAN Regional Forum offers the UK another diplomatic point of engagement with the Far East beyond the numerous bilateral ties that the Cameron Government re-invigorated in the last few years. Fundamentally though, FPDA remains the most legitimate and well-served reason for continuing British involvement in Southeast Asian affairs—and has rightly been defined as the 'cornerstone' of British defence engagement with the region.

Naturally, these links allow other British goals to be achieved, including the promotion of British defence industry through the second goal of defence engagement. The two goals are intrinsically linked, perhaps more so than many officials would like. Furthermore, the concerns held by the single Service Chiefs over funding defence engagement tasks that may support foreign policy aims are legitimate and raise questions as to which tasks will be supported in the future.

Yet the UK's Armed Forces have much to offer the Far East, symbolic or otherwise. As a means of building confidence and showing solidarity with its partners in Asia-Pacific, Britain can add to its FPDA foundations and work within the existing security structures to promote good order, particularly at sea. Additionally, it would bring capability and a degree of credibility to the region that is welcomed and, excluding the US contribution, arguably lacking.

As a region prone to environmental disasters, Asia-Pacific needs all the international assistance on offer. As a region prone to conflict, it requires reliable and influential partners and allies to assist with the maintenance of sovereignty and stability. These are clearly roles that the UK's armed forces can support, if not permanently, then at least persistently through FPDA, reinforced by diplomatic lines of engagement.

## Notes

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- 1 The author completed this paper while attending the UK Command and Staff College in 2014. It has been slightly updated to reflect the UK's so-called 'Brexit' decision in June 2016 to leave the European Union.
- 2 Rudyard Kipling, 'Mandalay' in *Departmental Ditties and Ballads and Barrack-Room Ballads*, Doubleday, Page and Co: New York, 1919, p. 190, available at <[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Departmental\\_Ditties\\_and\\_Ballads\\_and\\_Barrack-Room\\_Ballads](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Departmental_Ditties_and_Ballads_and_Barrack-Room_Ballads)> accessed 1 April 2014.
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