

The UK Military in the Asia-Pacific

Richard Reeve – February 2018

Subject:

This primer explains what presence, relations and obligations the UK military has in Asia-Pacific, defined here as the largely maritime region between Hawaii, New Zealand and the Asian mainland.

Context:

The UK has rapidly increased its military links with Asia-Pacific countries since 2015, almost half-a-century after it disbanded its large military presence in Southeast Asia. It plans to reinstate a larger and more frequent military presence there in future. Drivers include leverage for post-Brexit trade deals, support for British arms exports, the revived ability to project power via the Royal Navy's new aircraft carriers, China's increasingly assertive posture in critical sea lanes, and the rebalancing of US-allied forces towards East Asia. Crisis in relations between North Korea, the United States and other countries is the most acute dimension to this revived presence in 2018.

Does the UK have overseas territories in the Asia-Pacific region?

In the 19th and 20th centuries the UK was a major colonial power in Southeast Asia and Oceania. After the main retreat from empire, Hong Kong was the most populous British colony for over three decades until its 1997 handover to China. Thereafter, the UK has held no territory in Asia or the western Pacific. The nearest remaining overseas territories are:

Key points:

- While the UK has held no territory in the Asia-Pacific since 1997, it retains a small standing military presence via a garrison and training base in Brunei.
 - The UK has no mutual defence treaties with Asia-Pacific states but has strong defence relationships with Australia, Brunei, Malaysia, New Zealand and Singapore. Commitments to South Korea and US and French territories are more ambiguous.
 - UK participation in regional military exercises has increased markedly since 2016, including new joint exercises with France, Japan and South Korea.
 - Asia-Pacific is a key target market for UK arms exports and this is a driver of the heightened presence in the short-term.
 - Risks of UK involvement in regional conflict chiefly revolve around territorial disputes in Borneo and the South China Sea, and the possibility of war in Korea.
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- the depopulated British Indian Ocean Territories, including the major US naval and air base at Diego Garcia, 3,600 km west of Singapore; and
 - Pitcairn Islands (population: 50), 5,000 km east-northeast of New Zealand.

Diego Garcia, along with British Overseas Territories Gibraltar and the Sovereign Base Areas (Cyprus) plus Oman and Singapore, is part of a chain of military facilities that link the UK to the Pacific.

What are the UK's defence commitments in the Asia-Pacific region?

The UK is not strictly bound by any current treaty to come to the defence of any ally in the Asia-Pacific region. However, it does have several close partners in the region, which it would probably feel obligated to defend against external aggression.

The **Five Powers Defence Arrangements (FPDA)** are a series of bilateral accords that bind the UK to its main former colonies in Southeast Asia and Oceania: Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand and Singapore. Set up in 1971 as the UK closed the last of its air and naval bases in Singapore and Malaysia, the FPDA was originally intended to secure these countries against Indonesia. The five powers commit to immediate consultations on joint action in the event of aggression rather than an immediate military response.

Brunei, which was a British protectorate until 1984, has a rolling five-year bilateral defence cooperation agreement with the UK, last renewed in February 2015. While not strictly a mutual defence treaty, the permanent presence of British forces in the Sultanate very closely entwines the two countries' defence.

In addition to Australia and New Zealand, Queen Elizabeth II is head of state of three more **Commonwealth Realms** in Oceania: Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu. This entails no formal defence commitment, although the constitutional relationship might provide pressure for or justification of British intervention in case of external aggression.

The **UKUSA Agreement** is a secret intelligence-sharing arrangement by which the five 'Anglosphere' powers – Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK, USA – have established the world's most powerful electronic surveillance network, often called **Five Eyes**. British Hong Kong was long an important listening post in this network but the UK is not thought to have provided fixed surveillance infrastructure in

Asia-Pacific since 1997. UKUSA is not a mutual defence alliance, although the five states are mostly bound to one another by other defence treaties or arrangements.

The **North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)** is explicit in its founding charter (Article 6) that its mutual defence guarantees only apply to continental North America, Europe, surrounding and connecting seas. Thus, legally, a missile attack from Asia on Alaska or California would automatically invoke a collective NATO response, but a similar attack on Hawaii (now a full US state), Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands or American Samoa (Unincorporated Territories of the United States in the Pacific) would not. However, the NATO Secretary-General has asserted a role for NATO in supporting the US response to North Korean threats to Guam. Between 2012 and 2014, NATO signed Individual Partnership and Cooperation accords with Australia, Japan, South Korea, Mongolia and New Zealand. These formal partnerships are still far from constituting mutual defence treaties.

France is the last **European Union** country to maintain territories in Asia-Pacific (New Caledonia, Wallis & Futuna), albeit over 7,000 km from mainland Asia. These are officially Overseas Countries or Territories (OCTs) of the EU, which implies an ambiguous collective security responsibility. Post-Brexit, the UK and France are still likely to maintain a strong bilateral defence commitment.

United Nations Command was the mechanism by which the UK fought in the Korean War (1950-53). As one of 16 signatories to the 1953 Declaration Concerning the Korean Armistice, the UK committed to resist any renewed act of aggression there. However, successive British governments have clarified that this is not a binding military commitment. It is quite separate from the US-Republic of Korea Mutual Defence Treaty.

The UK was bound to the collective defence of the Philippines and Thailand between 1954

and 1977 through the **Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)**. While the US State Department still recognises SEATO as binding, despite its institutional dissolution in 1977, the UK appears to believe such guarantees have lapsed.

Does the UK maintain a standing military presence in the Asia-Pacific region?

Since 1971 the British Armed Forces has maintained a garrison in Brunei, rights to use Singapore naval facilities and made regular regional deployments for training exercises.

British Garrison Brunei The Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam hosts a battalion of light infantry from the Brigade of Gurkhas, support units, a flight of three Army Air Corps utility helicopters, and the **Jungle Warfare Division** training school. In addition to several hundred Gurkhas, Brunei hosts around 170 British troops and 300 civilian personnel with more troops rotated through for training. Recruited in Nepal and paid for by the Sultan, the Gurkha battalion acts as both a British guarantor of the security of Brunei, its monarch and British commercial interests (dominant oil company Royal Dutch Shell is located beside the garrison), and as an acclimatised reserve for British tropical operations. More UK personnel are embedded with the Royal Brunei Armed Forces to fill training, educational and staff posts.

Singapore The MoD's Defence Equipment & Support has a tiny logistics presence at the Singaporean naval base at Sembawang (formerly HM Naval Base Singapore) to host, refuel and supply British warships passing through the Malacca Straits. In September 2017 the head of the Royal Navy speculated publicly on basing British frigates in Singapore in future.

This presence is very different from the pre-1971 situation, when the Royal Navy based its Eastern Fleet in Singapore. At its post-war peak during the mid-1960s Indonesia-Malaysia

Confrontation, this fleet was as large as the current Royal Navy and included a carrier battle group. The RAF's Far East Air Force meanwhile had at least five fighter squadrons in Malaysia and Singapore and stored tactical nuclear bombs in Singapore. Armoured and artillery units were withdrawn from Hong Kong in the mid-1970s, but there remained a brigade-sized force of British and Gurkha infantry plus Royal Marines until the 1990s.

Do UK forces conduct military exercises in the Asia-Pacific region?

In addition to the constant land forces training presence in Brunei, there are occasional deployments of Royal Navy and Royal Air Force (RAF) units to the Asia-Pacific. Most years, the UK sends land, air and/or maritime forces for a joint FPDA exercise in or around Malaysia. For example, RAF Typhoon fighter aircraft visited Malaysia, Japan and South Korea for joint exercises in autumn 2016.

Joint exercises with the latter two non-allies is a new development for UK forces. As a Sending State to the United Nations Command, British staff officers serving with the UN in Korea have long participated in annual command exercises there, but their number has increased since 2016.

Up until 2009, at least one British warship would annually visit East Asian waters to patrol and exercise with regional partners. While only two such scheduled visits (frigate HMS Richmond in 2011; destroyer HMS Daring in 2013) were made between 2010 and 2017, two Royal Navy frigates are scheduled to visit the western Pacific in 2018. HMS Argyll will visit Japan for bilateral exercises in December after FPDA exercises off Malaysia; HMS Sutherland arrived in Australia in February en route to Northeast Asia this spring.

Since 2017, Royal Marines and two or three commando helicopters have also embarked on the French Navy's helicopter carriers for their annual Exercise Jeanne d'Arc cruise to the

Western Pacific. This is part of operationalising the Anglo-French Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF).

Participation in regional exercises and patrols since late 2016 represents a significant re-engagement of UK air and naval forces with Asia-Pacific after several years of near absence. London has pledged that its new aircraft carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth, will patrol the South China Sea as one of its earliest priorities after achieving initial operating capability in 2021. The last time a British aircraft carrier battle group sailed in the Pacific was 1997, although a four-ship amphibious task group exercised off Malaysia in 2009 and HMS Illustrious (a former light aircraft carrier) made an unscheduled humanitarian deployment to the Philippines in response to Typhoon Haiyan in 2013.

How important are UK arms sales to the Asia-Pacific region?

The UK is a middle-ranking supplier of arms to the Asia-Pacific. In the last 20 years, for example, it has not concluded a deal to supply any combat aircraft, major warships, submarines or armoured vehicles to the region. Much of what it has sold is in naval: patrol vessels/corvettes, ships engines, radars and sonars, maritime helicopters. Jet engines, missiles and air-to-air refuelling systems are significant aerospace exports. The main recent customers are South Korea, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, China, Japan and Thailand.”

Asia-Pacific is one of the fastest growing markets for military equipment, especially in the maritime domain. The British government is keen to develop export markets for arms in the region as well as to bolster the UK’s status as a defence partner there. It believes that a greater military presence in the region will help it achieve these aims and secure support for future trade deals. Since 2016, Singapore has hosted the British Defence Staff for Asia-Pacific, which coordinates UK regional

“defence diplomacy”: training, exercises and arms sales.

Key short-term targets include selling Type-26 frigates to Australia and Eurofighter Typhoons to Malaysia. Recent frigate and Typhoon deployments are intended to support marketing of these BAE Systems products. Longer term, the UK will market its new Type-31e light frigate to smaller regional navies.

Are there regional conflicts in which the UK might become involved?

Geopolitical tensions in the Asia-Pacific region are currently higher than at any point since the 1960s wars in Southeast Asia. While Indonesia no longer threatens its neighbours, there are numerous regional conflicts or flashpoints that risk involving UK forces in military confrontations.

South China Sea Disputes While London has stressed that the FPDA makes no commitment to protecting its allies’ maritime exclusive economic zones (EEZs), and that it does not recognise any national claims to territory within the Spratly archipelago, there is scope for future conflict between Malaysia, Brunei, China and/or Vietnam in the South China Sea. Malaysia lays claim to several of the disputed Spratly islands and shoals, all of which are claimed by Brunei, China and/or Vietnam. Vietnam has occupied some of these; Brunei and China have not. Since the early 1980s Malaysia has built an airport and naval base on Swallow Reef, also claimed by China and Vietnam. In theory, China might lay claim to Malaysian and Brunei offshore oil and gas fields within its “nine-dot line”. During 2017 both British foreign and defence secretaries stated their intention to use the Royal Navy to pursue freedom of navigation operations around Chinese-occupied islands, which may more directly create tensions with China.

North Korea Tensions on the Korean peninsula are as high in 2018 as any point since the Korean War, with the United States

threatening pre-emptive strikes to destroy the North's nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities. While the UK has no major regional capabilities to contribute, it is possible that Washington would request British involvement in any new hostilities. This could perhaps include using special forces to infiltrate the North. The UK's Joint Forces Commander and 30 troops visited the South for exercises in August 2017. Or it might include helping Japanese and US navies to find and destroy the North's many attack submarines. HMS Sutherland is optimised for this role.

Brunei Part of the British Garrison in Brunei's assumed role is to protect the Sultan from domestic unrest, as British forces did in the 1962 Brunei Revolt. The country has been under martial law ever since. While it is politically calm, another dramatic fall in oil prices or scandal impacting respect for the royal family could destabilise Brunei in the medium term.

Northeast Borneo The Philippines maintains an historic claim to the east of Malaysia's Sabah State via the defunct Sultanate of Sulu. The Philippine islands closest to Malaysia are the base of the Islamic State-aligned Abu Sayyaf Group, which has targeted Malaysia. Elements of this group seized the Philippine city of Marawi in 2017, prompting intervention by US special forces. A major attack by IS on a Malaysian target might precipitate deployment of UK forces there.

Taiwan China maintains an active territorial claim to Taiwan (Republic of China) and is developing the military capacity to reabsorb it by force. Unlike the United States and France, the UK has consistently recognised Beijing and avoided any military ties to Taiwan; it is thus less likely to become involved in any future military conflict there.

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