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## **US-UK Consultations on the Indo-Pacific: An Unexpected Development for Southeast Asia**

*John Frederick Bradford and Philip Shetler-Jones*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*US-UK consultations on the Indo-Pacific in March are an indication of the UK's stamina in sustaining its Indo-Pacific tilt in the face of the war in Ukraine, and an affirmation that the US prioritises the UK as a key partner in its new Indo-Pacific Strategy. Although the joint statement includes few clear deliverables, the institutionalisation of this bilateral mechanism lays to rest some doubts and sets a promising foundation for the future.*

### **COMMENTARY**

On 7-8 March United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US) delegations met in London for consultations on the Indo-Pacific in the first high-level talks between the allies on this topic in decades. This comes shortly after the Indo-Pacific strategy (IPS) released by the Biden administration in February 2022.

#### **The diplomatic context**

The IPS takes inspiration from the Obama administration's "pivot." It distinguishes itself from the more combative Indo-Pacific strategy of President Trump by promoting "ideas and initiatives for the preservation of common goods like prosperity, resilience, and the principle that countries have the right to choose their path free from coercion and bullying," even as it shies away from reconciling such aims with less consensual action that may be [required to maintain US regional primacy](#). The steady stream of meetings the US has hosted and attended with Japan, India, Australia, France, and the UK at head of government and cabinet levels suggests the Biden Administration is prioritising "Quad" members (Australia, India, Japan) and Europeans ahead of

states at the region's centre (ASEAN member states). Exemplifying this prioritisation, US Secretary of Defense Austin [visited Southeast Asia](#) in July 2021, only after he had visited Japan, South Korea, and India and travelled twice to Europe. The Secretary of State followed in December 2021 after having similarly prioritised trips to other regions.

The meetings in London sought to identify areas where IPS implementation could be coordinated with the UK Indo-Pacific "tilt", a policy articulated in the "Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy: Global Britain in a Competitive Age," commonly known as the "Integrated Review." This document [concisely laid out](#) the rationale for the UK's policy to expand and deepen its economic, security, and social ties to the Indo-Pacific region, though the UK had also started its turn to the region a decade earlier.



US Marine Corps F-35B on board the HMS Queen Elizabeth - a harbinger of closer US-UK cooperation? *The appearance of U.S Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

Despite traditionally close US-UK ties and [broad alignment of Indo-Pacific interests](#), opportunities offered by the relationship have [drawn little attention in Washington](#). More precisely put, the enthusiastic welcome that US Indo-Pacific naval leaders and maritime hands have offered the Royal Navy has not extended across the US strategic community. Scepticism about British capacity and stamina [may have been checked as](#) the 2021 HMS [Queen Elizabeth Strike Group deployment](#) (CSG21) to the region was followed up by the [permanent presence of two River-class](#) Offshore Patrol Vessels, but such doubts continue to [restrain American expectations](#).

### **The medium is the message**

Though not headline-grabbing, the meeting was deceptively meaningful and offers clues to deeper and more long-term trends. For a start, considering the low level of attention previously paid to the UK "tilt" (including in the IPS, which only mentions the

UK three times, including the two references to the AUKUS arrangement), the US prioritisation of a UK meeting calls for some reflection.

This was the first high-level interagency international meeting on the Indo-Pacific following the IPS, and Kurt Campbell's first overseas trip in his current role as "Indo-Pacific Tzar". Also, the meeting went ahead as the Russia-Ukraine crisis escalated into war. The fact that the US engaged the UK on the Indo-Pacific in the midst of a European upheaval suggests US optimism about the value of their alliance beyond the Euro-Atlantic region and goes some way to answering questions raised by [controversial coverage](#) of comments made by US Secretary of Defense Austin when responding to questions about what Europeans add to Indo-Pacific security during an address in Singapore.

### **What's new**

The fact that Ukraine was addressed upfront in the joint statement reflects more than US-UK commitment to support Ukraine's defence and provided leadership to the global coalition in response to Russian aggression. In welcoming the "growing coordination among allies and partners across the Atlantic and the Pacific," and listing "unprecedented commitments from Indo-Pacific countries," the statement reveals a convergence of views on the linkage between Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic security that is emerging as a salient point of alliance politics. This principle of "indivisibility of security" linking Ukraine to Asia stood out in the speeches of [UK Prime Minister Johnson](#) and [Foreign Minister Truss](#) at the recent Munich Security Conference. While Japan's Foreign Minister Hayashi [endorsed](#) the same principle, India's Minister of External Affairs Jaishankar has [maintained](#) that in practice proximity still matters, and transatlantic security is not tied directly to Indo-Pacific security, a distinction that has been borne out in respective policy towards Russia over subsequent weeks.

The statement's endorsement of "growing coordination among allies and partners across the Atlantic" hints that this US-UK mechanism may be designed in part to ensure US-UK relations keep pace with intensified US-EU diplomacy, which has moved swiftly to heal some of the Trump-era rifts. The initiation of the Trade and Technology Council in September 2021 was followed in December by the initiation of regular [High-Level Consultations on the Indo Pacific](#), alongside a [US-EU dialogue specifically on China](#).

The statement mentioned a couple of new areas of cooperation.

The first is in the Pacific Islands, an area too long neglected by both governments. The area has been so infrequently visited that earlier this month [HMS Spey discovered Henderson Island is located](#) one mile south of where it was last charted in 1937. However, the Pacific Islands is also an area where the UK's tilt has borne recent fruit. HMS Spey [delivered crucial aid to Tonga](#) following January's volcanic eruption and tsunami and provided the venue for the 19 March 2022 signing of a [new UK-Fiji Memorandum of Understanding](#) on maritime security that will allow for the exchange of crewmembers to improve cooperation, coordination, and interoperability.

The pledge "to enhance ties with India" also stands out and received wide coverage in the Indian press, since no other Indo-Pacific nation receives such direct attention.

This should not be read as downgrading other key US or UK partnerships, but as highlighting that both highly value they place in expanding their relationships with India, a priority featured both in the tilt and the IPS.

The statement closes with a commitment to continuing dialogue, notably between the US National Security Council and the UK National Security Secretariat, with the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office. The US has typically arranged such consultations in a “2+2” format with the US side led by the State Department and Department of Defense. Anyone in London worried about being [bypassed](#) in the post-Brexit era could be further reassured by what was billed as an “inaugural” meeting of allies to “reinforce their commitment and sustain it in the long term.”

### **What’s next?**

Although the UK increased its military presence in Asia, its forces have yet to participate in the US’ premier Northeast Asia Alliance exercises, *Keen Sword* (US-Japan [with Canada having also joined](#)) and *Foal Eagle* (which has been paused since 2018 and where the UK only participates in the command post exercise as a [United Nations Sending State](#)). Exercises tailored for the UK presence such as the September 2021 [Pacific Crown](#) are important but do not reflect readiness for Britain to support US operational plans in the region. While British forces have shown unit-level interoperability with American forces under Indo-Pacom, they have yet to demonstrate, or practice, their readiness to integrate into the large-scale bilateral and multilateral operations that the US rehearses in preparation for potential maritime warfare scenarios. Expanded British participation in more US-organised command elements and during command post exercises would be a key indicator of mutual strategic commitment with the advantage of not being restrained by force deployability schedules. Reviewing other major Indo-Pacom exercises shows that the UK has joined, as a third-party, the [US-Australia exercise Talisman Sabre](#). In contrast, despite being a [founding member](#) of the *Rim of the Pacific* (RIMPAC) exercises, the UK has been somewhat absent in recent years and did not send forces to the [most recent iteration in 2020](#).

Another area to watch is the deployment of the UK Littoral Response Group (South) to the UK Joint Logistics Support Base in Oman in 2023 as stated in the 2021 Defense Command paper. How much time the forces spend in East and Southeast Asia, or if they remain closer to Europe, will be crucial. The UK has also previewed plans to forward-deploy a Type 31 *Inspiration*-class frigate to the Indo-Pacific but has not yet identified a regional host nation. Might it nest in alongside US Navy ships in Japan, or look to a partner such as Singapore or Australia?

AUKUS will impose demanding milestones for the US-UK relationship and despite the diplomatic impact of the initial announcement, smooth sailing into the future is not guaranteed. Australian submarine purchases have a bruising record (e.g. Japan and France) and hard choices lie ahead regarding US and UK technology and production capacity. Current expectations in the London and Washington policy communities are incompatible, and there is high risk of important constituencies being disappointed. Only time will tell if this new US-UK consultative body will smooth over such bumps in the road or be shaken by them.

*John Frederick Bradford is a Senior Fellow in the Maritime Security Programme, Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, RSIS., and Philip Shetler-Jones is a consulting fellow for the Indo-Pacific at Chatham House.*

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**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: [rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg) | W: [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)