

POLICY BRIEF

UK-Japan Strategic Convergence Post-Brexit? The Roles of Maritime Security, Defence Engagement and Military Exercises

Abstract

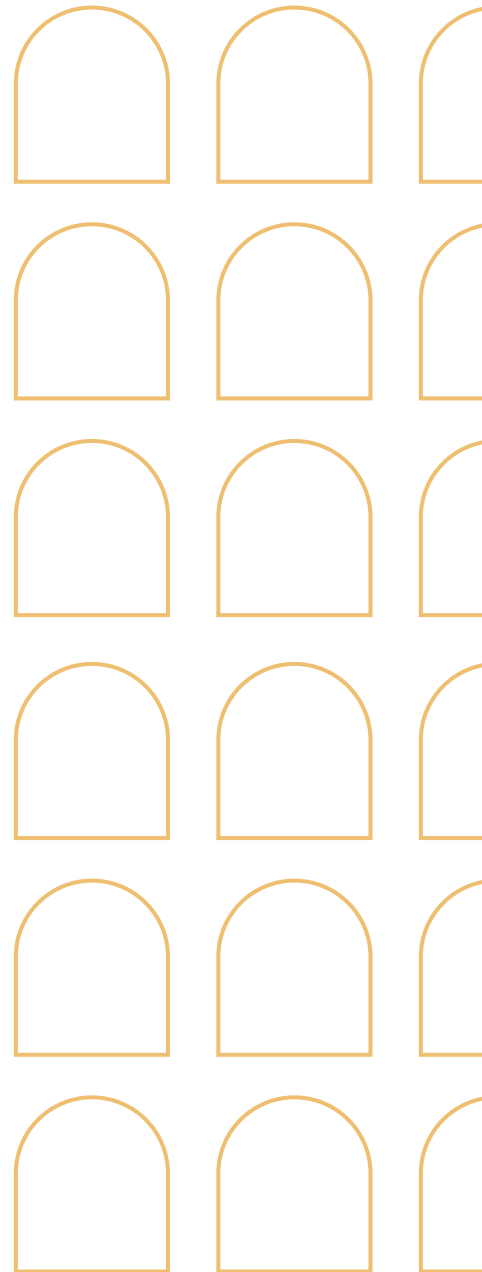
The UK and Japan are increasingly talking the language of strategic convergence and security cooperation and saying that this will be manifested through maritime security and naval defence diplomacy. This policy brief assesses the motivations behind this thinking, how to conceptualise the respective approaches of the UK and Japan to defence diplomacy, and therefore the possibility of more substantive maritime cooperation. It argues that the two states are indeed converging, with perhaps the UK moving further towards serving Japan's model of defence diplomacy and security interests. At the same time, a number of potential obstacles to moving from rhetoric to action in strategic and maritime cooperation are presented.

Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK), following the 2016 referendum decision to leave and then eventually withdraw from the European Union (EU) in 2020, has been pursuing a revised international 'Global Britain' strategy. The Global Britain discourse indicates that, now freed from EU protectionism, the UK can conclude free trade agreements (FTA) in growing markets in Latin America, Africa and most especially the Asia-Pacific, as seen in the UK's move in 2021 to seek accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive

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Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTP-P).¹ In terms of broader diplomacy and security, Brexit is viewed as offering the UK the opportunity to renew or create alliances with the ‘Anglosphere’ and Commonwealth, and to enable an Indo-Pacific ‘tilt’ as outlined in the UK’s integrated review of defence, security, development and foreign policy in March 2021.² In looking for new allies and partners, the UK has fixed on Japan, both before the issue of Brexit arose but now especially post-Brexit, as its key economic and security partner in the Asia-Pacific, and lists it as the first of its closest strategic partners in the region.³

Conversely, although Brexit has shaken some confidence in the UK’s reliability and previous usefulness as the main entry point for Japan into Europe, the Japanese position remains that the UK is a key diplomatic, economic and security partner. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō Japan elaborated a strategy of a ‘proactive contribution to peace’ and an ‘Abe Doctrine’ which sought to diversify Japan’s security partners both in the Asia-Pacific and globally.⁴ Japan’s approach under Abe and his immediate successor Suga Yoshihide has emphasised the need for it to work closely with partners that share liberal values, the rule of law, free trade, democracy and human rights, and wish to maintain access to the global commons and freedom of navigation.

In bilateral meetings and statements the UK and Japan have subsequently confirmed the importance of the strategic relationship and emphasised shared values as its basis. They have focussed on

moving from strategic convergence to more substantive security cooperation. The 2017 UK-Japan Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation outlined sixteen areas for bilateral cooperation, with a particular stress on maritime security and joint exercises.⁵

Maritime security clearly makes sense as a feature in the UK-Japan relationship given its stated importance in their respective national security strategies. The UK’s 2014 National Strategy for Maritime Security talks of the UK as an island nation dependent on the sea for security and prosperity; an increasingly contested maritime domain; the need to uphold maritime norms and the security of maritime routes; and building the capacity of states in key maritime zones.⁶ Japan’s NSS mirrors this discourse, with its identification as a maritime state; the necessity to maintain “open and stable seas” based on the rule of law and freedom of navigation; and a desire to promote the maritime capabilities of and cooperation with other states.⁷

The consequence is that the UK and Japan have started to articulate common maritime security objectives. A British and Japanese prime ministers’ joint statement of 2012 referred to the importance of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and freedom of navigation; a 2014 joint statement spoke of a mutual commitment to defend the global commons of the high seas; a 2017 joint vision statement referred to the two countries as “free-trading island nations with a global reach committed to the rules-based international system;” and the UK’s integrated review spoke of overlap-

1 Department for International Trade, *UK Accession to CPTPP: The UK’s Strategic Approach*, June 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/995485/cptpp-strategic-case-accessible-v1.1.pdf; John Hemmings, *Global Britain in the Indo-Pacific*, Henry Jackson Society, Asia Studies Centre Research Paper, no. 2, 2018.

2 HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, March 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age-the_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf, p. 66.

3 HM Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, November 2015, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478933/52309_Cm_9161_NSS_SD_Review_web_only.pdf, p. 57; HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, March 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age-the_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf, p. 62; Michito Tsuruoka, “Japan and the UK as Strategic Partners After Brexit”, *Asia-Pacific Bulletin*, no. 410, January 2018.

4 Kokka Anzen, “Hoshō Kaigi, ‘Kokka Anzen Hoshō ni Tsuite’”, 17 December 2013, <http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-j.pdf>; Christopher W. Hughes, *Japan’s Foreign and Security Policy Under the ‘Abe Doctrine’: New Dynamism or Dead End?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

5 HM Government, “Japan-UK Joint Declaration on Security,” 31 August 2017, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/641155/Japan-UK_Joint_Declaration_on_Security_Cooperation.pdf.

6 HM Government, “National Strategy for Maritime Security,” 13 May 2014, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/322813/20140623-40221_national-maritime-strat-Cm_8829_accessible.pdf.

7 Kokka Anzen “Hoshō Kaigi, ‘Kokka Anzen Hoshō ni Tsuite’”, 17 December 2013, <http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-j.pdf>.

ping bilateral concerns in the South China Sea and the East China Sea.⁸

The UK, in particular following Brexit and with its quest for a distinctive strategy, has gone into overdrive on the importance of maritime cooperation as a symbol of its new global commitments beyond the EU. The integrated review's Indo-Pacific tilt is attempting to manifest this to a great extent through projecting UK maritime strength in the region, and the new HMS *Queen Elizabeth* carrier strike group was despatched in May 2021 to conduct exercises with regional states. The group was scheduled to conduct exercises with Japanese warships around the Horn of Africa and then eventually around Japan itself in September towards the conclusion of its despatch.⁹

The UK and Japan have thus declared the convergence of their general strategic interests, with a focus especially on common maritime interests and demonstrating this through maritime exercises. How then should we understand and conceptualise the importance of the maritime dimension and maritime exercises in realising substantive security cooperation and the purported aims of the two states?

This policy brief introduces literature from works on 'defence diplomacy' to attempt to map where the UK and Japan are located vis-à-vis each other and the opportunities to ensure that they can move beyond statements to action and that bilateral cooperation does not revert to simple rhetoric in the longer term.

Defining and Understanding Defence Diplomacy

Defence diplomacy is defined by the UK as the "peacetime use of armed forces and related infrastructure as a tool of foreign and security policy" and this provides a useful set of working assumptions to start to understand both the UK and Japan's use of maritime exercises for strategic ends, and their use more generally.¹⁰ The literature on defence diplomacy identifies a number of types and purposes

of defence diplomacy, which can be integrated and encapsulated in the following scheme.¹¹

Approaches and objectives for defence diplomacy

	Pragmatic	Transformative
'Old'/Realist-style statecraft	Balancing with existing allies to maintain order	Balancing with emerging allies to transform values and order
'New'-style cooperation	Reassurance of former adversaries and non-allies to maintain order	Reassurance of former adversaries and non-allies to transform values and order

The styles of approach in the horizontal row headings can be characterised as 'old' and 'new' in the sense that 'old' strongly belongs to the traditional power politics approach often seen in the Cold War but also resurgent today in a once again contested international system, whereas 'new' belongs more to the tradition of common security and reaching out to former adversaries and non-allies to initiate cooperation as often seen in the post-Cold War period. Regarding objectives and the vertical column headings, defence diplomacy can be termed 'pragmatic' in the sense that it looks to simply maintain the existing international systems or balance of power, or just international stability even with adversaries and non-allies. But defence diplomacy can also be 'transformative' in looking to exploit opportunities to change the international system and also the partners engaged with by shaping their values through cooperation. Hence, it may be utilised to move away from a confrontational system to establish a more open and collaborative system, or it could be used to actually construct new balances of power with new partners.

Defence diplomacy itself may encompass a variety of activities, ranging from contact between civilian and defence officials, to provision of expertise on training military personnel, to HA/DR, and then through to military-to-military exchanges and exer-

8 HM Government, "UK-Japan Joint Statement," 1 May 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-japan-joint-statement>; HM Government, "Japan-UK Joint Declaration on Security," 31 August 2017, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/641155/Japan-UK_Joint_Declaration_on_Security_Cooperation.pdf; HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, March 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age_the_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf.

9 "Japan to hold first drills with UK aircraft carrier off Africa," *Nikkei Asia*, 10 July 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/Japan-to-hold-first-drills-with-UK-aircraft-carrier-off-Africa>.

10 Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster, *Reshaping Defence Diplomacy: New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 6.

11 This model is derived from See Sang Tan and Bhuhindar Singh, "Introduction," *Asian Security*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2012, pp. 221-231; Daniel Foulkes Leon, "Japan's Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia," *Global Politics Review*, no. 1-2, 2019, pp. 6-49.

cises.¹² Military exercises are thought to be particularly effective forms of defence diplomacy because they can function across all categories from pragmatic through to transformative. Moreover, exercises often serve the key function of transitioning from initial security contacts and reassurance to ‘hard’ military cooperation in capacity-building, military equipment transfers and logistic support. In effect, military exercises can in certain forms become rehearsals for real warfighting.

Amongst all the forms of military exercises naval activities are seen as having special utility. Military naval vessels readily serve as symbols and extensions of national sovereignty and power and therefore demonstrate state-to-state cooperation. These assets are perhaps uniquely flexible in that they can be deployed in a relatively self-contained way to demonstrate presence, can be withdrawn quite readily if necessary and can also be graduated in deployment to be calibrated against the degree of cooperation and presence required. Naval vessels can also be highly visible in their presence on the high seas to make security cooperation explicit. In addition, there is a strong element of universality in that navies can deploy globally and to all littoral states.¹³

UK Defence and Naval Diplomacy

In its defence diplomacy and naval exercises the UK has undergone an interesting evolution since the end of the Cold War. The UK talks of ‘defence engagement’ and the 2015 National Security Strategy describes it as a “core” role for the UK Armed Forces. The UK, of course, practised old-style/pragmatic diplomacy during the Cold War through NATO and other partnerships in order to ward off Soviet influence. But in the post-Cold War period it has shifted more to new-style/transformational defence engagement, with an emphasis on working out-of-region and on capacity-building with less established navies, and with a new range of state partners. Hence, as the 2015 National Security Strategy states, “Royal Navy ship visits, for example, are a key way of projecting our soft power.”¹⁴

The UK armed forces have progressively sought to raise the level of interaction with the Asia-Pacific in recent years and have accelerated this post-Brexit, thus reflecting the shifting overall UK strategy. The Royal Navy was deployed on HA/DR missions to the Philippines in 2013, and conducted exercises close to the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea in September 2018. The Royal Navy and US Navy (USN) conducted in essence, if not in their official name, freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea in January 2019. The talk has increasingly been of the UK’s ‘return East of Suez,’ the potential for re-establishing a permanent Royal Navy base in Singapore and more recently of maritime security cooperation with Japan’s concept of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QUAD.

Japan’s Evolving Approach to Naval Defence Diplomacy

For its part, Japan has stepped up its version of defence diplomacy, termed ‘defence cooperation’ or ‘defence exchange.’ The Japanese defence establishment was clearly reluctant to engage in much defence diplomacy during the Cold War to avoid engendering fears among its neighbours of a resurgence of its military presence in East Asia. Instead, Japan took tentative steps to engage through MSDF participation in the RIMPAC exercises, justifying its participation as essentially a US-Japan exercise taking place alongside the larger multilateral exercise but allowing the MSDF to start to work with other navies.¹⁵ In the post-Cold War period, Japan then started to exploit the less restrictive international environment to gradually build-up its defence diplomacy, practising very much a new-style/pragmatic approach to work with states in Southeast Asia that were previously more aligned with the Soviet camp or entirely non-aligned. In more recent years, Japan has further upgraded its defence diplomacy as the maritime security environment is seen to have deteriorated in the Asia-Pacific with the rise of Chinese naval power. Arguably, after the 2010 incident of a clash between a Japanese coast guard vessel and a Chinese trawler around the disputed Senkaku Islands, and from the Japanese perspective a new

12 A full menu of defence exchanges may include: contact between civilian and military officials; defence attaches; placement of personnel in partner militaries and defence ministries; deployment of training teams overseas; provision of expertise on democratic control of armed forces, defence management and technology; training of foreign civilian and military personnel; humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR); provision of military equipment and capacity-building; naval ship visits and exchanges; and bilateral and multilateral military exercises.

13 J. J. Widen, “Naval Diplomacy: A Theoretical Approach,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, vol. 22, no. 4, pp. 715-733.

14 HM Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015: A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*, November 2015, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478933/52309_Cm_9161_NSS_SD_Review_web_only.pdf, p. 49.

15 Paul Midford, *Overcoming Isolationism: Japan’s Leadership in East Asian Security Multilateralism*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020, pp. 34-35.

awareness of China's willingness to not just posture but actually take action on its territorial claims, Japan has significantly ramped up its defence diplomacy. Japan might be said to now be shifting towards old-style/transformational diplomacy in looking to work with new partners to reinforce or rebuild a balance of power vis-à-vis China's apparent lack of respect for the existing status quo in the maritime domain.¹⁶ Japan has thus transited more to capacity-building, military equipment transfers and more overt military exercises with partners in Southeast Asia.

For instance, Japan started to dip its toe in the water of regional maritime cooperation and exercises through engagement in anti-piracy operations and HA/DR with Southeast Asian maritime states. From the mid-2000s, Japan started to transfer patrol boats to Southeast Asian states, and the establishment of strategic partnerships with Indonesia in 2006, the Philippines in 2009 and Vietnam in 2014 brought relationships with maritime cooperation measures at their core. Japan's concerns about China's growing maritime influence after 2010 have helped to spur increases in MSDF bilateral and multilateral military exercises with Southeast Asian states and have expanded training, capacity-building and ship port calls. The revised 2014 Three Principles of Defence Equipment Transfers and the 2015 revised ODA Charter have facilitated the further stepping up of equipment and training of coast guards in the region. Japan has consolidated this approach by again embedding these sorts of activities within its concept of FOIP.

UK-Japan Strategy Consolidated in Naval Defence Diplomacy?

As the logical outcome of their shared strategic aspirations and growing focus on maritime security and exercises, the UK and Japan have now initiated exercises involving each other multilaterally and bilaterally. The Royal Navy, MSDF, USN and the Republic of Korea Navy held anti-piracy exercises in the Gulf of Aden in April 2017; the Royal Navy, MSDF, the French Navy and USN conducted joint exercises off Guam in May 2017; and the Royal Navy, MSDF and USN conducted joint exercises in the Philippine Sea in December 2018 and in the Western Pacific in March 2019. The Royal Navy and MSDF conducted a 'friendship' exercise in Bahrain in April 2016; a joint exercise in Japanese territorial waters in April 2018 and again in the Indian Ocean in September 2018.

Overall, therefore, it is apparent that there is indeed a growing degree of not just rhetorical but also substantive strategic convergence between the UK and Japan in maritime security and exercises.¹⁷ The interesting question is just how far the two states are converging and in which direction. As noted earlier, Japan has arguably gravitated from its initial approach of new-style/pragmatic defence diplomacy to a position in which, in order to fend off primarily China's burgeoning maritime influence, it is now practising old-style/transformational defence diplomacy that looks to reinforce an incipient security architecture that can somewhat balance China's rise. The UK has largely pinned its interests in maritime defence diplomacy on a more new-style/transformational approach, but it appears that with its increasingly close cooperation with Japan and Indo-Pacific 'tilt' it is perhaps being drawn more into Japan's emerging approach and serving to reinforce structures to buttress regional states and new partners against China's influence. This is clearly a crucial space to watch to see if the Royal Navy, through bilateral cooperation with the MSDF, possibly with the US in freedom of navigation operations and with others states through FOIP, becomes a truly more active presence in the region, and therefore military exercises will create the channel for ever more meaningful cooperation between the UK and Japan as military partners.

Conclusion: Opportunities and Limits to UK-Japan Security Cooperation

At the same time, it will also be important to monitor broader diplomatic and political considerations that will shape the possibilities of UK-Japan security cooperation. The UK and Japan certainly talk a good game of similar and converging security interests, but these may not always be so naturally convergent. The UK and Japan clearly have different perspectives on the utility of the EU as a diplomatic partner outside defence exchanges, on how far Russia should be engaged and even on China. Sino-UK ties have recently cooled over issues such as Hong Kong and maritime security, but it was only a few years ago that a 'golden age' of bilateral ties was talked about, and the UK clearly does not wish to alienate China and become overly involved by the relationship with Japan in any Sino-Japanese tensions. The UK is not necessarily perceived as the most reliable of international partners, currently due to its arguably inconsistent approach to treaty obligations with the EU, and the discourse of some

16 Christopher W. Hughes, "Japan's 'Resentful Realism' and Balancing China's Rise," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 9, no. 2, Summer 2016, pp. 109-75.

17 Yee-Kuang Heng, "UK-Japan Military Exercises and Mutual Strategic Reassurance," *Defence Studies*, 2021 published online.

of its Brexiteers about the new freedom to forge and leave alliances as it suits UK interests, perhaps leading to the mantle of a new 'perfidious Albion.' Even if it genuinely wishes to commit more to Japan and Indo-Pacific security the UK is also surely very aware of the sheer limits of its capacity as a military actor. Just maintaining an aircraft carrier strike group is immensely challenging for the Royal Navy given that much of its fleet is devoted to protecting carrier assets, and so leaving limited room for deployments relating to its core responsibilities closer to home waters. Indeed, the US has recently suggested that the UK might serve a more effective security role by devoting its resources to the European area to relieve the burden on the US so it can focus on the Indo-Pacific.¹⁸ The UK's commitment to Indo-Pacific security might also prove more transitory in the longer term if it achieves its objective of acceding to the CPTPP and thus no longer requires its military presence to be a lever to influence regional partners.

There may also be some doubts on the Japanese side over the degree of Japan's commitment to ties with the UK. As noted above, Japan may evaluate that in the longer term the EU is still a more important partner than the UK. Japan's security focus seems to be, perhaps not unsurprisingly, exclusively on the Indo-Pacific and itself, and the expectation is that other states should come to the region to assist Japan. Beyond anti-piracy missions around the Gulf of Aden, there is little sense the Japan wishes to deploy the MSDF to assist other states in their regions with their more immediate security interests. This lack of reciprocity may make it harder to sustain UK-Japan maritime cooperation once the immediate desire to establish a post-Brexit UK strategy has somewhat faded. Finally, even if Japan has the stated desire to pursue a proactive contribution to peace, there are nagging doubts as to whether it continues to have the actual will to do so after the resignation of Abe. Suga was clearly committed to many of the security policy precepts of his forerunner but proved much weaker domestically and undercut the ability of Japan to have in place the necessary political dynamism to pursue a more vigorous foreign and maritime security policy.¹⁹

The fall from power of Suga the time of writing in September 2021 and search for a successor again raises questions about the stability of Japanese foreign policy.

18 'Britain More Helpful Closer to Home Than in Asia, Says US Defence Chief,' *The Financial Times*, 27 July 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/7fb26630-a96a-4dfd-935c-9a7acb074304>.

19 Christopher W. Hughes, Alessio Patalano and Robert Ward, 'Japan's Grand strategy: The Abe Era and its Aftermath', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2021, pp. 125-160.

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