Chapter 5

THE UK'S APPROACH TO THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Scott Edwards

In her recent speech at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam's 17th South China Sea Conference, British Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Indo-Pacific Seema Malhotra, noted with concern the risk of rising tensions in the region.[1] Laying out the importance of the South China Sea in maritime trade, livelihoods, and regional prosperity, her keynote statement highlighted the UK's ongoing interests and activities in improving stability and preventing escalation. This served as an important intervention at a time when the UK's regional commitment had become less certain. While this was partly a result of the focus on Russia in Europe following the illegal invasion of Ukraine, difficult budgetary considerations and a less clear whole-of-government stance concerning China from the relatively new Labour Government have further reduced the UK's regional impact.

Despite this, there are a web of political, diplomatic, and military measures implemented by the UK in the region that aim to improve stability. This paper will argue that the UK balances its goals with capacity limitations primarily by diplomatically leveraging its expertise concerning the maritime domain to build stronger relationships and resilience with its partners. This allows the UK to maintain a meaningful and consistent presence below headline – and costly – deployments. It will start by laying out the UK's assessment of escalation, before unpacking the web of activity undertaken as a result of this assessment. It focuses broadly on maritime domain awareness (MDA), maritime resilience, convening power, and science diplomacy, while also recognising the not-inconsiderable military interventions the UK continues to make – some of which also supports these diplomatic strands.

On this basis, the paper ultimately concludes the UK can (and should) maintain its modest military presence while bolstering its presence with the relatively resource-friendlier diplomatic interventions centring British expertise and experience. However, the UK could (and should) coordinate more effectively with other middle-power partners, especially the organising of expertise, to create more resilience and improve stability in the South China Sea. This would contribute to advancing consensus-building, more effective messaging, and more efficient capacity-building.

[1] Seema Malhotra, "2025 Indo-Pacific Conference: Minister Malhotra Keynote Speech," GOV UK, December 1, 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/2025-indo-pacific-conference-minister-malhotra-keynote-speech.

A UK assessment

Any assessment of escalation needs to begin with an understanding of how the UK Government (hereafter HMG – His Majesty's Government) perceives the potential challenges China poses more broadly. In the 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (IR2021) named 'Global Britain in a competitive age',[2] China's 'increasing international assertiveness' was placed at the centre of geopolitical shifts.[3] China was understood as a "systemic challenge… to our security, prosperity and values",[4] thus sparking the so-called 'Indo-Pacific tilt', a realigning of UK diplomatic activity to the Indo-Pacific. Through IR2021, the Indo-Pacific – as well its maritime dimensions – gained a prominent place as a key element of wider national strategy. While the 2023 Integrated Review 'refresh' (IR2023) was produced in response to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine,[5] it too highlighted "China's more aggressive stance in the South China Sea",[6] that "poses an epoch-defining challenge to the type of international order we want to see".[7]

In 2024, the Labour Party replaced the long-serving Conservative Party in power. While it criticised the previous Conservative governments' policies on China as 'inconsistent' and promised a long-term strategic approach to UK-China relations,[8] there have been signs of consistency regarding HMG's perceptions of China. Most notably, the Labour Government began the process of a 'China Audit', "an audit of our most complex bilateral relationship to deliver a long-term strategy, moving beyond cheap rhetoric to a data-driven, cross-Government approach".[9] While much of it remains classified, "the audit described a full spectrum of threats, from espionage and cyber-attacks to the repression of Hongkongers and attacks on the rules-based order".[10] The common tagline that has emerged is "we will co-operate where we can and challenge where we must", but with regards to the South China Sea that the UK will "confront China's dangerous and destabilising activity in the South China sea".[11]

---

[2] HM Government, "Global Britain in a Competitive Age," HM Government, March, 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60644e4bd3bf7f0c91ebabd/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age-_the_Integrated_Review_of_Security__Defence__Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf
[3] HM Government, "Global Britain in a Competitive Age."
[4] HM Government.
[5] HM Government, "Integrated Review Refresh 2023," HM Government, March, 2023, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/641d72f45155a2000c6ad5d5/11857435_NS_IR_Refresh_2023_Supply_AllPages_Revision_7_WEB_PDF.pdf
[6] HM Government, "Integrated Review Refresh 2023."
[7] HM Government.
[8] Russell Taylor, "UK Government Policy Towards China," House of Lords Library, December 12, 2024, https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/uk-government-policy-towards-china/.
[9] Hansard, "China Audit," HC Deb. Vol. 769 cols. 990, June 24, 2025, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2025-06-24/debates/63984F18-8D5A-47DF-9B98-9AE010A726BC/ChinaAudit.
[10] Hansard, "China Audit."
[11] Hansard.

Because the China Audit remains classified, two further documents are worth highlighting as a source of continuity concerning perceptions that China is escalating regional tensions. The Strategic Defence Review 2025 (SDR2025) states that China is:

> [A] sophisticated and persistent challenge. China is increasingly leveraging its economic, technological, and military capabilities, seeking to establish dominance in the Indo-Pacific, erode US influence, and put pressure on the rules-based international order.[12]

The National Security Strategy 2025 (NSS2025) also highlights:

> [T]he challenge of competition from China – which ranges from military modernisation to an assertion of state power that encompasses economic, industrial, science and technology policy – has potentially huge consequences for the lives of British citizens.[13]

The NSS2025 primarily positions Taiwan as the area of particular risk for escalation, but the South China Sea is also mentioned as a central component to trade and HMG's perspectives regarding global order.

The UK's assessment of escalation in the South China Sea is, therefore, largely pessimistic and centres primarily on China's role in undermining the rules-based order on both regional and global scales.

From rhetoric to reality

With such a pessimism regarding escalation, it should perhaps naturally follow that the UK is leveraging significant resources towards the problem. However, there are severe structural limitations – not in the least a reduction in budget for key areas of activity. The Labour Government upon taking power "found a £22 billion black hole in the public finances".[14] There are two notable implications that may impact HMG's work in the South China Sea.

First, is the decision to reduce Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to 0.3 per cent of Gross National Income (down from 0.5 per cent). This includes significant cuts to bilateral aid which currently underpins much of the UK's broader maritime programming that seeks to create greater maritime resilience in the region, including the environmental and science-based interventions discussed below. While this came with a commitment to

[12] HM Government, "The Strategic Defence Review 2025," Ministry of Defence, July 8, 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-strategic-defence-review-2025-making-britain-safer-secure-at-home-strong-abroad/the-strategic-defence-review-2025-making-britain-safer-secure-at-home-strong-abroad.
[13] HM Government, "National Security Strategy 2025," Cabinet Office, August 29, 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-security-strategy-2025-security-for-the-british-people-in-a-dangerous-world/national-security-strategy-2025-security-for-the-british-people-in-a-dangerous-world-html.
[14] Prime Minister's Office, "How We're Fixing the Foundations of the Country," Prime Minister's Office, August 31, 2024, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/how-were-fixing-the-foundations-of-the-country.

raise the UK's defence spending to five per cent by 2035 – up from around 2.3 per cent currently – it is unclear as to how much of this will be targeted towards the Indo-Pacific. In NSS25, the Indo-Pacific is discussed mostly in reference to its "inextricable" linkages to the Euro-Atlantic.[15] This – along with SDR2025 - suggests on the one hand that a growing preoccupation with Russia will once again reorient resources towards the Euro-Atlantic sphere. While the linkages are made from this region to the Indo-Pacific, and a "NATO first but not NATO only" phrase enunciated,[16] SDR2025 bluntly states that "finite resources mean the UK cannot be everything to everyone", which suggests some limitations.[17]

Second, is the reduction in the Integrated Security Fund (ISF) from an allocation of £982 million in 2024/2025,[18] to £854.82 million in 2025/2026.[19] Formerly the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), the ISF is a cross-governmental Cabinet Office-led fund that aims to bolster efforts in preventing conflict and building stability overseas whilst combatting threats to UK national security. The benefits of the ISF are stated to be its integrated approach, the catalytic effects, the ability to engage in high-risk programmes, and its agility. With regards to Southeast Asian maritime security, the objectives of the fund are to "a values driven, secure, prosperous, and sustainable maritime sector in Southeast Asia, conforming to the Law of the Sea, that that reduces the threat to the UK's security and interests at home and abroad". Indeed, much of the work discussed below was funded by the ISF, and its curtailment – including the Southeast Asia Maritime Security programme – does cast some doubts on the sustainability of programming that will require new avenues of funding. These are likely to be difficult to secure given the cuts to the overarching ODA budget discussed above.

A final potential limitation pertains to the structure of policymaking. The UK's Indo-Pacific strategising is not institutionally monolithic, with whole-of-government processes highlighted in IR2021. The FCDO – itself a result of a controversial and difficult merger of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) with the Department for International Development (DFID) – is part of a broader governmental structure that can have differing perceptions and priorities, including defence, intelligence, and maritime related agencies such as the Joint Maritime Security Centre (JMSC) and Department for Transport (DfT). While this is not always problematic – with a diversity of institutional perspectives contributing to a more holistic view of escalation and de-escalation mechanisms – it does

[15] HM Government, "National Security Strategy 2025."
[16] Gwyn Jenkins, "First Sea Lord's Speech to the International Sea Power Conference," HM Government, 8 December 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/first-sea-lords-speech-to-the-international-sea-power-conference.
[17] HM Government, "The Strategic Defence Review 2025."
[18] HM Government, "Integrated Security Fund annual report 2024 to 2025," October 30, 2024 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-security-fund-annual-report-2024-to-2025/integrated-security-fund-annual-report-2024-to-2025#annex-a-isf-financial-spend-2024-to-2025.
[19] Baroness Anderson, "Integrated Security Fund Update: ISF Allocations for Financial Year 2025/26," UK Parliament, November 18, 2025, https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-11-18/hlws1064.

mean coordination is required. This can be especially problematic due to the high levels of classification regarding HMG's approach to China.

Measures to avert escalation

Despite these concerns, the UK implements several significant measures to avert escalation. Diplomatically, the UK has taken a strong stance in its official position that it does not take sides in sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea, despite making claims and taking sides in the distant past.[20] Instead, it has a stated commitment to international law and the primacy of UNCLOS the United Nations Convention On the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS – otherwise known as the Law of the Sea Treaty LOST). Indeed, the UK has long advocated for Freedom of Navigation, stemming from a time where international trade and its prosperity were dependent on far-removed colonial positions.

The UK has "concurred with the 2016 tribunal finding that China's nine-dash line claim to most of the sea areas within the South China Sea was contrary to the allocation of maritime entitlements under UNCLOS".[21] As a result, the UK consistently encourages parties to settle their disputes peacefully and through existing legal mechanisms within UNCLOS. In October 2024, the UK highlighted such commitment when it announced that it would hand over the strategically important Chagos islands to Mauritius as mandated by the International Court of Justice (ICJ). This consistent support for UNCLOS and international law allows for the UK to use diplomatic opportunities – including the aforementioned South China Sea Conference in Vietnam – to credibly call for states to refrain from activity likely to raise tensions, including land reclamation, construction and militarisation.

Such diplomatic support goes beyond statements, and the UK has been proactive in linking expertise to ensure that states can support legal and credible claims. UK-based legal expertise, for example, helped inform some of Vietnam's first continental shelf claim, while the UK also held a course regarding the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) specifically in the region and funded regional participants at the annual International Foundation for the Law of the Sea summer school.[22] Showing how diplomatic links move beyond just the FCDO, the UK's Hydrographic Office is increasingly taking centre stage in contributing hydrographic and geospatial capacity building in the South China Sea. This also includes a leadership programme for Southeast Asian hydrographers.[23] Such interventions are important for reducing escalation, as they allow states to use this

[20] Bill Hayton, "Strategic forgetting: Britain, China, and the South China Sea, 1894-1938," *Modern Asian Studies 57*, no. 3 (2024): 966-985, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000373.
[21] FCDO, "UK Government's Position on Legal Issues Arising in the South China Sea," House of Commons, September 3, 2020, https://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2020-0516/UK_govt_analysis_of_legal_issues_in_the_South_China_Sea.pdf.
[22] FCDO, "CSSF Annual Review (2023/2024)," 2024, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/679a02ecd4f0d327e77071f5/Southeast_Asia_Maritime_Security_Annual_Review_Summary_2023_to_2024.odt.
[23] FCDO, "CSSF Annual Review (2023/2024)."

information and capability to strengthen their legitimate legal claims – ultimately promoting and strengthening the consensus regarding UNCLOS and providing a brake to unilateral escalations.

Additional UK diplomatic measures take place within largely four overarching and inter-linked strands, including: fostering greater awareness of what is happening at sea, creating greater maritime resilience, promoting knowledge exchange, and encouraging science-based interventions and economic development. Each strand leverages expertise in the UK concerning the maritime domain, as well as the sharing of practices regarding maritime governance more broadly. They allow the UK to make an impact and maintain good relations with other claimant states even when the UK does not have the capacity to provide expensive platforms, equipment and other related commitments such as consistent deployments (though there are some exceptions discussed below).

In terms of creating awareness, the UK is using its own experiences of MDA to benefit claimant states' resilience and understanding of what is happening at the oceans. In October 2025, for example, the UK and Vietnam elevated their relationship to a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'.[24] In the announcement, they highlighted how cooperation was expanding concerning MDA, with a commitment to continue sharing best practice on MDA initiatives. On a practical basis, this is being constituted by a Vietnamese visit to the UK's National Maritime Information Centre (NMIC) ran by the JMSC, an MDA workshop in Vietnam, and a seemingly rapid movement toward greater information sharing. MDA visits have also centred on Indonesia and Malaysia, with an MDA-liaison at the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) in Singapore acting as an important focal point.

The UK is particularly proactive in presenting its 'whole-of-system' approach to MDA, including at the US-organised Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT) exercise which draws together participants from across the region. The UK holds a significant advantage with regards to MDA because it offers a process to learn from rather than a platform. The UK's own MDA experiences are particularly rich, with NMIC – underlined by the Royal Navy's MDA programme – a central facilitator of reform of the UK's maritime governance. By being platform agnostic, the practices shared are complementary to the states' current capacities and capabilities, while reducing contestation with other actors who focus on the sharing of platforms (such as the European Union Critical Maritime Routes in the Indo-Pacific Project's (EUCRIMARIO) Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing Platform (IORIS) discussed below). These activities help develop the resilience of claimant states and create a better shared

[24] HM Government, "Joint Declaration on the Elevation of UK - Viet Nam relations to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," Prime Minister's Office, October 29, 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-declaration-on-the-elevation-of-uk-viet-nam-relations-to-comprehensive-strategic-partnership.

understanding of what is happening at sea, likely reducing the risks of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation.

It is not just MDA that is used to create more resilience. Maritime security features in the revived the UK-Thailand and UK-Vietnam strategic dialogues, the newer strategic dialogue with Malaysia, the partnership roadmap with Indonesia, and a partnership agreement with Singapore. When also looking at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-UK Plan of Action (which is being refreshed at the time of writing, with the Ministry of Defence contributing for the first time), as well as these various bilateral roadmap and dialogue statements, capacity-building is mentioned repeatedly across multiple areas of cooperation. Capacity-building projects encompass a broad range of activities - from improving law enforcement capacity, to providing training or facilitating educational opportunities. While it has taken some time for the UK to find its role in a space characterised by overlapping capacity building initiatives and asymmetries in prioritisation, it appears that the UK is increasingly aligned with its regional partners. Indeed, considering the UK has been a dialogue partner of ASEAN since only 2021, engagement has been rapidly scaling up, and the current refresh of the Plan of Action is particularly responsive to regional needs.[25] One area of emerging interest appears to be the UK's experiences in creating a maritime security strategy (National Strategy for Maritime Security – NSMS). [26] The joint statement with Vietnam, for example, highlighted "sharing best practice on…maritime security strategies",[27] and such practices are likely to resonate in a region where states are grappling with cohering their own maritime security governance.[28] ASEAN too is refreshing its own Maritime Outlook (AMO), with some expressed ambitions that this provides a stronger guideline for ASEAN's maritime governance. A more coherent approach to governing their waters, as well as greater resilience more broadly, creates important strengths that could provide a collective stopgap to escalation.

A third area of focus is the fostering of knowledge exchange between the UK and regional states and draws upon the UK's convening power. This is linked to the above in that it strengthens MDA and resilience but is constituted by a different array of activity. The UK has held an annual Maritime Security Forum in Bali for the past three years, which – while not focusing primarily on the South China Sea – links expertise and perspectives from the UK and South China Sea claimant states. Experts and practitioners from

[25] HM Government, "Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-United Kingdom Dialogue Partnership (2022 to 2026)," HM Government, August 4, 2022, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/asean-uk-dialogue-partnership-plan-of-action-2022-to-2026/plan-of-action-to-implement-the-asean-united-kingdom-dialogue-partnership-2022-to-2026.
[26] HM Government, "National Strategy for Maritime Security," August, 2022, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-maritime-security-strategy.
[27] HM Government, "Joint Declaration on the Elevation of UK - Viet Nam Relations to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership."
[28] J. Gilbert, "Malaysia to Enhance Maritime Security to Ensure Economic Prosperity, *The Sun*, May 2021, 2025, https://thesun.my/business-news/malaysia-to-enhance-maritime-security-to-ensure-economic-prosperity-AF14111133.

Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, and the Philippines have featured at previous iterations, with Vietnam joining for the first time in 2025. The symposium sees a broad focus, from issues such as the linkages between cyber and maritime diplomacy, to that of dark shipping in regional waters. Track 1.5 dialogues have also been supported by the FCDO in Vietnam and Malaysia. While these focus on softer issues, the rationale is likely similar to that above. The more effective control that states have over their own waters (in line with UNCLOS), the less likely escalation is to occur in a domain constituted by activities commonly known as 'grey zone' – a term used to encompass various hybrid threats characterised by their coercive nature yet that lay below the threshold of war.[29] A common example in the region that often targets and take advantage of governance gaps is China's deployment of 'maritime militia' fishing vessels, which are used to blockade contested claims and provide a persistent presence.[30]

Finally, but relatedly, the UK is focusing on scientific and economic interventions. The UK maintains a Science and Technology Network (STN), and there has been some focus on the intersections of climate change and the South China Sea, as well as biodiversity challenges more broadly. UK International Development has funded the publication of two research books where academics – in part – focus on ocean science collaborations and the importance of this marine scientific research in potentially managing disputes in future.[31] Economic exploitation, particularly focused on resource exploitation, also featured at the UK's Track 1.5 dialogue with Vietnam. The logic of both subsets of activities seems to be to foster cooperation around 'softer issues'. These activities serve to highlight the benefits of such cooperation to claimant states, creating some degree of interdependence – and therefore raising the costs of conflict and providing incentives for peaceful resolution – as well as encouraging a more collective intra-ASEAN stance that could perhaps be called upon during crises as well. Indeed, the roles of environmental cooperation and joint economic development have long been held up as a potential Confidence Building Mechanism (CBM), though they have an uncertain impact.[32]

One activity which bridges economic development and broader maritime resilience is a recent £4 billion maritime deal between the UK and Indonesia. The new Maritime Partnership Programme (MPP) led by British defence firm Babcock will see the UK and Indonesia jointly develop maritime capability for Indonesia's navy and more than 1,000

[29] Vladimir Rauta and Sean Monghan, "Global Britain in the Grey Zone: Between Stagecraft and Statecraft," *Contemporary Security Policy* 41, no. 4 (2021): 475-497, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2021.1980984.
[30] Asia Maritime Transparency Index, "Dropping the Act: China's Militia in 2024," AMTI, February 27, 2025, https://amti.csis.org/dropping-the-act-chinas-militia-in-2024/.
[31] Nguyen Hung Son and Nguyen Thi Lan Aanh, *The South China Sea: The Geo-political Epicenter of the Indo-Pacific?* (Palgrave, 2025). See also, Nguyen Thi Lan Anh and Vu Hai Dang, *Viability of UNCLOS amid Emerging Global Maritime Challenges* (Palgrave, 2024)
[32] Ian Seow Cheng Wei, "From Corals to Conflict: When Do Environmental Issues Build Trust or Undermine it in the South China Sea?" RSIS Commentary, November 19, 2025, https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/from-corals-to-conflict-when-do-environmental-issues-build-trust-or-undermine-it-in-the-south-china-sea/.

vessels for its fishing fleets. The deal is supported by the UK's Blue Planet Fund, a £500 million programme supporting developing countries to protect the marine environment and reduce poverty. While primarily economic in nature, it is interesting to note that the announcement of the deal emphasises both the future potential for interoperability and the shared commitment the countries have to "stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific, upholding freedom of navigation and supporting a rules-based international order".[33] Indeed, much of the emphasis is on the intersection between defence and maritime capability.

These diplomatic interventions leveraging expertise are not the only means through which the UK approaches the region, and there are more conventional deterring activities aimed at preventing escalation. The UK has now sent two carrier strike group (CSG) deployments since they restarted in 2021, with transits in the South China Sea and involvement in exercises including Australia's Exercise *Talisman Sabre* 2025. HMS *Tamar* and HMS *Spey* – two Royal Navy Offshore Patrol Vessels – have also been forward deployed to the region. While their presence has mostly been defined by supporting regional partners with constabulary and humanitarian activities, they have also been involved in Five-Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA) exercises in the South China Sea, including this year's Exercise *Bersama Shield*. The main scenario involved the allies reacting to a fictious invasion of the Tioman island group,[34] with the FPDA credited with not only building stronger forces but also important networks.[35] The increased presence of the Royal Navy is intended to act as a deterrent through showing operational readiness, an ability to project power, as well as a commitment to do so in the region – raising the costs of unilateral aggression. Because these defence-oriented interventions also centre the role of networks and cooperation, with the CSG itself constituted by allies and partners – including from the EU – these activities also reinforce a collective stance to belligerence through greater interoperability.

Defence activities are also taking place through the UK's observer status in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus framework (ADMM+), where it is observing the Maritime Security Expert Working Group. While much of this complements the above, an interesting emergent area is the intersection between cyber-security and maritime security. Concerns centre on the fact that tensions in the South China Sea could escalate unintentionally in the face of unattributable cyber-attacks on maritime infrastructure. The ISF has dedicated £6.5million to cyber-security, and FPDA exercises have begun to incorporate a cyber-dimension, including a reflective role-reversal game (Cyber Board

[33] Prime Minister's Office, "£4bn Maritime Deal with Indonesia Set to Boost British Jobs and Support Indo-Pacific Security," Prime Minister's Office, November 21, 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/4bn-maritime-deal-with-indonesia-set-to-boost-british-jobs-and-support-indo-pacific-security.
[34] Navy Lookout, "HMS Spey Takes Part in Five Power Defence Exercise off Malaysia," April 23, 2025, https://www.navylookout.com/hms-spey-takes-part-in-five-power-defence-exercise-off-malaysia/.
[35] FPDA, "23rd FPDA Defence Chiefs' Conference," May 29, 2025, https://www.fivepowerdefencearrangements.org/newsroom/23rd-fpda-defence-chiefs-conference.

Game) which invites participants to plan and co-ordinate a cyber-attack on a fictional military logistics target.

Policy recommendations: Towards more effective joint working

Given the range and focus of UK activities is mostly built upon epistemic networks – with the UK unable to resource a more robust material and persistent presence – there is significant scope for more joint activities with middle-power countries in the region, including ASEAN, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and EU states. These would centre ASEAN and provide more effective capacity building.

Regarding ASEAN specifically – given it embodies most of the claimant states – an important step is to continue coordinating the regional expectations of what it is the UK should and could provide. Southeast Asian stakeholders seem to de-centre ideas of the UK as a leader in norm promotion or direct security provider and position the UK instead as a supporter of Southeast Asian developmental priorities and capacities.[36] There is a desire for the UK to continue to listen and identify key needs in the region. The UK for its part continues to stress ASEAN unity and expresses a desire to listen to partners. Next steps should focus on **developing areas where the UK can support ASEAN's maritime resilience – including through fostering greater policy coherence, connectivity and networking, and functional capacity-building – in a way that complements what other dialogue partners are doing.** The goal should be for ASEAN to create a more unified understanding (and policy) with regards to its oceans through effective consensus-building, and an ultimately a stronger collective basis for preventing escalation with China (even if that comes about gradually through consensus-building on less sensitive issues).

With regards to other middle-power countries – both inside and outside the region – the UK is already coordinating in important areas with likeminded partners. This is particularly the case with technology development that will have military means and provide a technological edge important for deterrence. The Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) – a joint plan to develop a next generation fighter jet – is implemented by Japan and Italy, countries that Alessio Patalano and Peter Wilkins highlight "have consistently signalled their commitment to a stable international order based on the respect of the rule of law and open societies".[37] The UK's involvement in the Australia-United Kingdom-United States Security Partnership (AUKUS) is another example. Focused primarily on cooperating to provide Australia with nuclear-propelled submarines (Pillar 1) Pillar 2 – currently with the US and Australia, but with the potential to also incorporate Japan – focuses on 'Advanced Capabilities' through workstreams

[36] Scott Edwards and Robert Yates, "The Empire Has No Clothes? The UK, the Indo-Pacific 'Tilt', and Bargaining Towards a Southeast Asian Role," *French Journal of British Studies* 29, no. 1 (2024): 1-28.
[37] Alessio Patalano and Peter Watkins, "'LEAP' Forward: Building a GCAP Generation," Kings College London, March, 2024, https://www.kcl.ac.uk/warstudies/assets/paper-21-alessio-patalano-and-peter-watkins-%27leap%27-forward.pdf

covering areas such as artificial intelligence, hypersonic missiles and quantum technologies.

Coordination in defence, especially with regards to UK involvement in multilateral exercises and within ongoing structures such as the FPDA discussed above, means inter-operability is also advancing at pace. **The UK is well-placed to support the further involvement of likeminded states who currently have little naval engagement with the region such as ROK, especially through structures such as the regular deployment of the CSG which sees multinational support forces and exercises.** The UK and ROK have already coordinated patrols focused on sanctions evasion in the East China Sea (with the UK also coordinating with Japan) from which to develop such activity.[38]

Given that defence diplomacy activities that focus on deterrence could be perceived (or presented) as creating further instability – and furthering escalation – these middle-power countries could focus on cohering their messaging in order to avoid misunderstandings in the region. Indeed, messaging has not kept pace with these activities, and it is not always clear what states are attempting to achieve with increasing collective efforts. The UK has already moved to a more explicit form of messaging which recognises and condemns China's aggressive activities when they occur. The focus on UNCLOS and its place in international order is an important step, but middle-power countries should amplify collective defence activities that contribute to common goods.

MDA is one area where coordination is ongoing to some degree but could be diversified further to incorporate more like-minded partners. The Five Eyes (FVEY) intelligence network, for example, has some focus on the Indo-Pacific in their MDA Programme, but this is an exclusive Anglosphere club – incorporating only the UK, US, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. MDA coordination regarding capacity building could be strengthened. This is particularly the case when ASEAN, its member states, and their agencies have limited absorptive capacities and limited abilities to engage. It is a particularly ripe area of coordination given other actors like the EU have prioritised MDA capacity building through the second phase of their CRIMARIO programme, which provides an MDA platform (IORIS) and conducts training on its usage. As the UK is platform agnostic, there is less competition in this regard.

Indeed, coordination with regards to capacity building and the broader diplomatic pillars discussed above have not also kept up with such pace. Given the sensitivities discussed above, these softer approaches to managing escalation are just as important to coordinate. **With the UK focused on network-based knowledge transfer across the different domains, a pooling of collective resources would not only reduce potential areas of overlap, but also deepen the expertise and experience accessed and shared. This**

[38] Joe Smith, "Expert Says Agreement Will Inject Life into Sanctions Monitoring as Russia and China Stonewall New Measures," *NK News*, 22 November, 2023, https://www.nknews.org/2023/11/south-korea-uk-to-conduct-joint-sea-patrols-to-enforce-north-korea-sanctions/.

could occur in both Track 1 and Track 1.5 settings. While each state has variations in interests and prioritisations, this should be increasingly viable. There is an over-arching common conceptualisation of maritime order and its underpinnings between many middle-power states. Complementarity would make the pooling and streamlining of resources and coordination a more efficient way of delivering capacity and responding to evolving challenges.

It should be noted that this is not only the responsibility of extra-regional partners to Southeast Asia. ASEAN and its member states could also coordinate more in terms of their 'ask' from regional partners, as well as actively encouraging coordination from dialogue partners in key areas where there is overlap. The AMO process discussed above could do this, given such documents are usually important for articulating priorities, making it easier for partners to make targeted and meaningful interventions.

Conclusion

It is clear that the UK has a pessimistic viewpoint regarding escalation in the South China Sea. While it views this region with concern, however, it has limited resources to implement relatively grand aims of preventing escalation. Notwithstanding the fixed points of strategy and values at the core of its approach, it is also clear that the UK's approach has necessarily become defined by pragmatism and adaptability, especially with regards to its diplomatic programming. The leveraging of networked epistemic communities to create more maritime resilience in the South China Sea amongst states pursuing legal claims is a key example of this. However, this should not be viewed as a second-best approach, as it shows how a country can contribute persistently in significant ways even in the face of limited resourcing and inconsistent prioritisations. The next steps should be not only the maintenance of these networks and their work, but also their widening through collaboration with other middle-power countries. ASEAN serves as the most important example of this given it embodies the 'recipient' member states, but more effective coordination and exploitation of joint resources between other middle-power countries – including extra-regional powers – could further advance consensus-building, effective messaging, and capacity-building. These are all important dimensions of preventing and reducing escalation.