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# The United Kingdom's Indo-Pacific Military Strategy and the Five Power Defence Arrangements: A Strategic Analysis

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**Abstract:** The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) plays a significant role in the United Kingdom's Indo-Pacific military strategy, primarily by enhancing regional stability and fostering military interoperability. While the FPDA contributes to deterrence, its non-binding nature limits its ability to respond decisively in crises. The arrangement provides a platform for multilateral engagement and allows the UK to maintain influence in Southeast Asia, but its deterrent value is indirect and dependent on political will. The FPDA complements more advanced security frameworks like AUKUS, which focus on high-end deterrence capabilities, but faces limitations due to the UK's resource constraints and its competing commitments, particularly in Europe. As a result, the FPDA remains an important yet constrained element in the UK's broader Indo-Pacific strategy.

**Keywords:** five powers defence arrangements; Southeast Asian security; UK's military strategy

## 1. Introduction

The United Kingdom's "Indo-Pacific tilt," as outlined in recent defence and security reviews, has emphasized stronger engagement in Asia, including through longstanding multilateral arrangements [1]. One key pillar of this engagement is the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), a defence pact linking the UK with Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Singapore. Established in 1971 in the wake of Britain's withdrawal from bases east of Suez, the FPDA was intended to help safeguard Malaysia and Singapore's security after independence. It is a consultative security arrangement rather than a formal alliance: the five nations agree to consult each other in the event of an external attack on Malaysia or Singapore, but there is no automatic commitment for military intervention.

This paper analyzes how the FPDA supports the UK's Indo-Pacific strategy and evaluates its strategic importance for Britain. It examines the FPDA's contribution to UK security objectives – including deterrence, military interoperability, and regional stability – and considers the impact of the UK's evolving commitments in the Indo-Pacific on its FPDA engagement. A comparison with other security partnerships (such as AUKUS) will highlight the FPDA's unique role, and the analysis will address challenges and limitations in using the FPDA as a strategic asset for the UK. The discussion draws on official UK government documents and defence policies, supplemented by scholarly assessments, to provide an academic yet policy-relevant evaluation.

## 2. FPDA in The UK's Indo-Pacific Strategy

### 2.1. The Strategic Value of FPDA

The FPDA has endured for over five decades and remains a noteworthy element of the UK's strategy in Asia. The UK government's *Integrated Review* explicitly called for reinforcing Britain's commitment to the FPDA as part of a broader "tilt" to the Indo-Pacific [2]. The FPDA is the only formal multilateral defence arrangement tying the UK to Southeast Asia's security architecture. Through the FPDA, the UK maintains a defence presence

Published: 12 February 2025



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and relationships in a region of growing importance, complementing Britain's pursuit of new partnerships and an increased profile in Asia. For instance, when the UK deployed its Carrier Strike Group to the Indo-Pacific in 2021, it integrated this deployment with FPDA activities – the carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth and her escorts participated in Exercise Bersama Lima to mark the FPDA's 50th anniversary.

Such steps demonstrate how Britain's heightened military engagement in Asia is channeled to bolster the FPDA, and vice versa, indicating a mutually supportive relationship between the FPDA and the UK's Indo-Pacific strategy. The FPDA thus serves as a ready-made framework for the UK to signal its "steadfast commitment" to Indo-Pacific security and prosperity [3], dovetailing with initiatives like Britain's ASEAN dialogue partnership and naval forward presence in Asian waters. In sum, London views the FPDA as a useful vehicle to project influence, fulfill its regional commitments, and visibly anchor its Indo-Pacific ambitions in a multilateral defence context [4].

One of the FPDA's contributions to UK objectives is its role – albeit limited – in regional deterrence and stability. Official UK statements underscore that the FPDA's *core purpose* is to promote regional stability: the arrangement's members "work together to promote stability in the region" [3] and provide "cooperative responses" to security challenges [4]. Notably, FPDA defence ministers have emphasized the principle of providing "Reassurance to the region" as one of the FPDA's guiding principles [1]. While the FPDA does not constitute a NATO-style collective defense guarantee, the very fact of five nations consulting and exercising together can help deter potential aggressors by signaling collective resolve [5]. The presence of external powers like the UK and Australia in Southeast Asia's security calculus means that any hostile actor contemplating aggression against Malaysia or Singapore must factor in the likelihood of wider involvement, which raises the stakes and thus has a deterrent effect.

On the other hand, British officials acknowledge that the FPDA's deterrence is indirect – rooted in presence and partnership rather than any automatic military response. By jointly engaging in defence planning and scenario consultations, FPDA members build confidence and transparency, which helps reassure Southeast Asian neighbors that the grouping is defensive, not directed against any one country. From the UK perspective, the FPDA is a low-cost force multiplier that enhances stability in a region but avoids conflicts with other regional powers including China and Indonesia. Thus, The FPDA's quiet deterrent value and stabilizing influence thus support the UK's aim to prevent conflict in the Indo-Pacific, complementing more overt deterrence measures Britain pursues (such as freedom of navigation operations or the AUKUS partnership for advanced capabilities).

## 2.2. The Military Contributions of FPDA

Enhancing military interoperability with allies and partners is a tangible benefit the UK derives from the FPDA. The FPDA has been described as a "quiet achiever" that, through regular exercises and combined training, has steadily built up the ability of the five member forces to operate together [5]. For the UK, a country that often deploys expeditionary forces abroad, the value of interoperability in the Indo-Pacific is significant—it ensures that British units can seamlessly integrate with Australian, New Zealand, Singaporean, and Malaysian forces during any combined operations or humanitarian missions in the region. The FPDA's structured programme of joint exercises is the primary vehicle for fostering this interoperability. Every year, exercises under the FPDA banner (such as Bersama Lima, Bersama Shield, and Suman Warrior) bring together air, naval, and land units from all five nations to practice conventional warfighting, maritime security, and increasingly also humanitarian assistance and disaster relief scenarios. UK forces also regularly participate, providing opportunities to train in unique environments (e.g. jungle warfare in Malaysia) and to coordinate with regional militaries. British officials highlight that FPDA exercises build "trust and confidence" among the armed forces and foster interoperability through people-to-people links [6].

A permanent FPDA joint headquarters – the Integrated Area Defence System (IADS) HQ in Butterworth, Malaysia – further institutionalizes interoperability: it is staffed by personnel from all five members, including six UK officers embedded in the command structure. This permanent presence allows the UK to contribute to integrated air and maritime defence planning for Malaysia and Singapore and to maintain familiarity with regional operating procedures. According to the UK's Defence Ministry, British staff and units have made a "vital contribution" to FPDA exercises like Bersama Lima, helping synchronize 5th-generation assets (such as the F-35 and advanced combat aircraft) with partner forces [7]. In recent years the UK has also led efforts to modernize FPDA cooperation by incorporating new domains like cyber defence into exercises and by planning for non-traditional threats (climate-related disasters, pandemic response) alongside conventional military training.

All these activities align with UK defence policy priorities of building a globally deployable force that can act with allies. By honing interoperability through the FPDA, the UK not only improves the effectiveness of any future coalition operations in Asia but also strengthens bilateral ties (e.g. UK-Australia or UK-Singapore defence relationships are deepened via FPDA engagements). Indeed, the UK's 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review explicitly cited the FPDA as a means to ensure "peace and security in the Asia-Pacific" and to strengthen Britain's relationships with partners like Australia [8]. The FPDA's ongoing training value thus directly serves UK objectives: it keeps British forces proficient in working with regional partners, showcases UK military professionalism, and signals that the UK is not just a distant observer but a capable contributor to Asia-Pacific security alongside local allies.

### 3. UK's Military Engagement with FPDA

#### 3.1. *Balancing Indo-Pacific Commitments with Global Responsibilities*

As a medium-sized power with global interests, Britain must carefully allocate military resources to avoid overextension. It means to balance UK resources and attention between the Indo-Pacific and other priority theaters. The government has been clear that Euro-Atlantic security remains the top priority – especially given Russia's aggression in Ukraine and NATO's central role in UK defense. The 2023 Integrated Review Refresh explicitly prioritized the "primary focus on the Euro-Atlantic" even as it established the Indo-Pacific as a permanent policy pillar. UK leaders argue that strengthening deterrence in Europe (through NATO) and expanding engagement in the Indo-Pacific are complementary, not contradictory, efforts. In the words of one senior parliamentarian, "maintaining serious, long-term engagement in the Indo-Pacific will not come at the cost of our security commitments in Europe, nor mean that we can ignore our own neighbourhood." [9].

In practical terms, the UK seeks to synchronize its commitments by leveraging alliances and multi-tasking its forces. For example, the Royal Navy's carrier strike group deployment to Asia in 2021 also served NATO objectives by integrating forces from NATO allies (a U.S. Marine Corps squadron embarked on HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, and the carrier group exercised with NATO partners enroute). The carriers themselves are considered "permanently available to NATO" even when deployed globally, meaning their deterrent value is factored into NATO planning. The UK also times its Indo-Pacific missions so as not to leave gaps in European defense; high-end assets are rotated through home waters and the Far East on a cycle. Additionally, Britain's deep ties with the United States facilitate burden – sharing – a strong US Indo-Pacific presence enables the UK to contribute in niche ways without solely underwriting regional security. British officials often emphasize "working alongside others" in the Indo-Pacific, indicating that the UK's role is as a force multiplier to allied efforts rather than a lone policeman spread across two oceans.

However, the balance is delicate. Crises can test the UK's ability to manage simultaneous obligations. The war in Ukraine since 2022 required Britain to devote substantial

military aid and attention to Europe, even as it tried to continue momentum in Asia. Thus far, the UK has maintained its Indo-Pacific initiatives (e.g. the OPVs remained deployed and new agreements like AUKUS proceeded), but any escalation in Europe could force tough choices. Britain's approach to balance is essentially prioritization plus partnership: Europe and the North Atlantic come first, yet the Indo-Pacific is given growing importance through collaborative efforts [10]. This dual-focus strategy reflects the UK's assessment that its security is indivisible – instability in Asia can affect Britain just as instability in Europe can, so it must contribute to stability in both theaters within the limits of its capabilities.

### 3.2. Comparison: FPDA vs. AUKUS

Contrasting the FPDA with AUKUS highlights the distinct role each plays in UK strategy. AUKUS, announced in 2021, is a trilateral pact between Australia, the UK and the US, focused on sharing advanced technology and helping Australia acquire nuclear-powered submarines. It represents a cutting-edge capability partnership, aimed squarely at strengthening deterrence against high-end threats in the Indo-Pacific (though no adversary is named, it is widely seen as a response to China's military rise) [11]. Strategically, for targeting China, AUKUS ties the UK into the region's security architecture in a very visible way – London will eventually forward-deploy submarines to Australia and co-develop advanced capabilities under this pact [12]. In terms of commitment, AUKUS is a multi-decade undertaking that demands significant investment and focus from the UK, aligning its defence industrial base and force posture with Indo-Pacific priorities.

The FPDA, by contrast, is a longstanding regional arrangement with a broader membership (including Malaysia, Singapore, and New Zealand, who are not part of AUKUS) and a more traditional cooperation scope. It is *geographically focused* on the defence of Malaysia and Singapore and has intentionally remained non-threatening and inclusive. FPDA exercises include conventional military drills, humanitarian assistance, and maritime security – activities that bolster members' security without explicitly targeting any rival. This makes the FPDA more palatable to Southeast Asian nations that are wary of being drawn into great-power rivalry. Indeed, the FPDA is sometimes described as a platform that provides security benefits “without attracting any negative attention” or backlash [5].

Unlike AUKUS, the FPDA does not involve the United States and thus represents a different vector of Western engagement in Asia – one that is more low-profile and focused on regional confidence-building. For the UK, this is advantageous because the FPDA allows Britain to engage important Asian partners who prefer multilateral arrangements not seen as anti-China blocs. Malaysia, for example, values the FPDA's defensive nature and has been comfortable working with the UK under its auspices, whereas it might be more hesitant to join overtly anti-China groupings [13]. In short, AUKUS and the FPDA fulfill complementary roles: AUKUS strengthens hard deterrence and advanced war-fighting cooperation with core Anglosphere allies, while the FPDA sustains broader regional defence relationships and stability. The UK government has cited both forms of partnership in its Indo-Pacific policy – heralding AUKUS as a major accomplishment and simultaneously reaffirming the FPDA as a “trusted mainstay of regional security architecture” in Southeast Asia [6].

## 4. Challenges and Constraints of FPDA

### 4.1. Constraints on Cooperative Security

The non-binding nature of the FPDA inherently limits its effectiveness in a crisis. Since the arrangement imposes no legal obligation for members to come to each other's defense, its deterrent power ultimately depends on political will and perceptions. An adversary could doubt whether Britain (or any other member) would truly intervene militarily if Malaysia or Singapore were attacked, potentially weakening the credibility of the

FPDA as a deterrent. This contrasts with alliance structures that have clear mutual defense commitments. In extremis, the FPDA would require swift diplomacy and consensus-building among five nations to coordinate a response – a process that might lag behind fast-moving security threats [14].

Moreover, each FPDA member has its own strategic calculus: divergent threat perceptions or foreign policy stances could hinder a unified stance. For example, Malaysia and Singapore both value the FPDA, but Malaysia's sensitivity to great-power friction (and its non-aligned tradition) might make it cautious about expanding FPDA activities that appear directed at China. New Zealand's more constrained military capabilities and pacific outlook might also limit how far FPDA collaboration goes beyond exercises [15,16]. These internal dynamics mean the FPDA tends to operate by the lowest common denominator acceptable to all – which can cap its ambition. Indeed, the FPDA has deliberately evolved at a "pace comfortable to all" members, ensuring cohesion but also implying self-restraint [6].

#### 4.2. UK's Resource Constraints

The UK's resource constraints pose a limitation. To remain a meaningful contributor, Britain must allocate ships, aircraft, personnel, and funding to FPDA exercises and related activities on a regular basis. With the Royal Navy and Army stretched by commitments in Europe, the Gulf, and home waters, sustaining deployments in Southeast Asia is challenging. The FPDA engagement must compete with pressing demands in the Euro-Atlantic (especially after Russia's war in Ukraine) and the Middle East. British defence policymakers acknowledge that the UK cannot simultaneously maintain maximal military weight in Europe and in Asia-Pacific – trade-offs are inevitable. Should the UK's strategic focus swing back toward NATO and European security (for instance, under a future government), there is a risk that Indo-Pacific initiatives, including FPDA involvement, could be deprioritized [17]. The risk is that the "tilt" could become more rhetorical than real if not backed by consistent resources. Already, analysts have cautioned that any British "retrenchment" from the Indo-Pacific – even if temporary – would undermine the trust and momentum the UK has built with regional partners [18].

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) remains an important, albeit limited, component of the United Kingdom's evolving Indo-Pacific strategy. While it offers substantial benefits in terms of regional stability, deterrence, and military interoperability, the FPDA's constraints are equally significant. The non-binding nature of the arrangement, combined with varying national interests among its members, limits the ability to act swiftly and decisively in the face of crises.

Additionally, the UK's global defense commitments, especially within NATO, continue to shape its ability to allocate resources consistently to FPDA initiatives. The partnership's role as a low-profile but stabilizing force in Southeast Asia, combined with the UK's growing emphasis on advanced capabilities through partnerships like AUKUS, underscores the complementary nature of these engagements. As the UK navigates competing priorities in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, it must remain vigilant to avoid overcommitting or undermining the FPDA's value as a strategic asset. The FPDA will continue to play an essential role in maintaining a credible UK presence in the region, but its capacity to serve as a primary tool for deterrence will require careful balancing with more robust, formal alliances and partnerships.

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