

ISSN 2580 6378  
E-ISSN 2580 7048



JURNAL  
ASIA  
PACIFIC  
STUDIES

Journal of International Relations Study Program  
Faculty of Social and Political Sciences  
Universitas Kristen Indonesia

Volume 8 | Number 1 | January - June 2024

## UNITED KINGDOM'S PRIMACY: ADDRESSING UK-ASEAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION THROUGH THE UK'S INDO-PACIFIC TILT OUTLOOK

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### Abstract

*The Asia-Pacific region has played major role in global trade and for recent years becomes a very dynamic region where geopolitical and geostrategic shift take place. Competition and shift in political, economy and security dimension, along with growing global power presence in the region create a situation where countries with interest in the region should take actions needed to secure their national interest in the region. United Kingdom through the UK's Indo-Pacific Tilt policy prioritizes stability in the region to support its geopolitical and geoeconomic ambition. The significance of the Indo-Pacific region for UK's economy is very tremendous, hence, the emerging regional challenges that threatens the stability in the region such as transnational crime and non-traditional security threats should be addressed accordingly. Pioneered at soft power as its diplomacy tool, United Kingdom is underpinning the importance of multifaceted cooperation with partners, countries, and regional actors to secure its national interest beyond its border. The strategic environment of ASEAN countries become vital to UK to realize and strengthen its ambition in the Indo-Pacific region. Multiple agendas in the key priorities' areas are deployed through peaceful meaning between UK and ASEAN to bring peace, security, stability and prosperity as well as to ensure open, free and secure trading area in the Asia-Pacific region.*

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Soft Power, The UK-ASEAN Strategic Partnerships, Geostrategic Shift.

### Abstrak

Kawasan Asia-Pasifik telah memainkan peran besar dalam perdagangan global dan dalam beberapa tahun terakhir menjadi kawasan yang sangat dinamis dimana terjadi pergeseran geopolitik dan geostrategis. Persaingan dan pergeseran dimensi politik, ekonomi dan keamanan, serta meningkatnya kehadiran kekuatan global di kawasan menciptakan situasi di mana negara-negara yang mempunyai kepentingan di kawasan harus mengambil tindakan yang diperlukan untuk mengamankan kepentingan nasional mereka di kawasan. Inggris melalui kebijakan Indo-Pacific Tilt Inggris memprioritaskan stabilitas di kawasan untuk mendukung ambisi geopolitik dan geoekonominya. Arti penting kawasan Indo-Pasifik bagi perekonomian Inggris sangatlah besar, oleh karena itu, tantangan-tantangan regional yang muncul yang mengancam stabilitas di kawasan seperti kejahatan transnasional dan ancaman keamanan non-tradisional harus diatasi dengan tepat. Dipelopori dengan soft power sebagai alat diplomasinya, Inggris menekankan pentingnya kerja sama multifaset dengan mitra, negara, dan aktor regional untuk mengamankan kepentingannya di luar perbatasannya. Lingkungan strategis negara-negara ASEAN menjadi penting bagi Inggris untuk mewujudkan dan memperkuat ambisinya di kawasan Indo-Pasifik. Berbagai agenda di bidang prioritas utama dikerahkan melalui makna damai antara Inggris dan ASEAN untuk mewujudkan perdamaian, keamanan, stabilitas dan kemakmuran serta untuk memastikan kawasan perdagangan yang terbuka, bebas dan aman di kawasan Asia-Pasifik.

Kata Kunci: Indo-Pasifik, Soft Power, Kemitraan Strategis Inggris-ASEAN, Pergeseran Geostrategis.

## **1. Introduction**

Indo-Pacific is located in the centre of the global economic region which is surrounded by 40 countries, it is projected to own 54% of the world's global growth by 2050 (UK Government 2023, 10). The strategic location is contested by the world's major powers to gain influence in the region in terms of economic, political, and security (Sen 2018). The United Kingdom, one of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and a leading voice in the Commonwealth as well as in G7 and G20 perceives the Indo-Pacific area as a dynamic region that become the focal point of UK global interest. The United Kingdom has a long-standing history of becoming a leading country in the world in utilizing the sea domain as a power projection in supporting shared prosperity and regional stability, and stronger diplomatic and trading ties. The UK has a global perspective and responsibilities in terms of geopolitical and geoeconomics shifts in the region, the United Kingdom through its Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy documents believes that the nature and distribution of global power are changing towards a more competitive and multipolar world (HM Government 2021).

The existence of other world's major power countries in the region, vast economic opportunities, and security risks and threats impose direct and indirect implications for UK interest in the Indo-Pacific region. In a greater view, the UK perceives the competition in this area will affect maritime security, regional tension, and new global trade arrangements. To project and maintain its consistent international influence in the region, the United Kingdom is utilizing its soft power tools to cooperate with strategic actors through diplomacy and multilateralism. ASEAN is perceived as an Indo-Pacific strategic regional actor of the UK and has an outlook to maintain the Indo-Pacific area favourable for their interest. ASEAN has a specific outlook on the Indo-Pacific that works in line with the UK tilt to the Indo-Pacific framework. ASEAN and the UK are collaborating to maximize opportunities as well as deter the risks and threats in the region while maintaining the clear objectives of the United Kingdom, "*deploy the full range of capabilities to defend free trade, freedom of navigation and the International Order.*" (HM Government, National Strategy for Maritime Security 2022, 76)

This paper aims to identify key objectives of the United Kingdom Tilt to Indo-Pacific framework and its development priorities in the region under the concept of soft power primacy. Further, this paper discusses ASEAN as United Kingdom's regional vital actor and emerging middle power in Indo-pacific region. Lastly, this paper pinpoints the values, challenges, and goals of United Kingdom to projecting its power and influence in Indo-Pacific.

## **2. Literature Review**

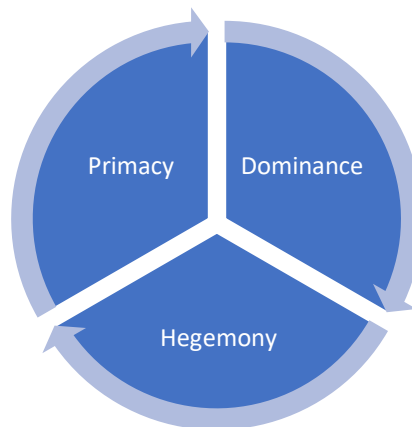
### **2.1 Strategic Partnership: United Kingdom Primacy**

Defining a sphere of influence in International Relations cannot be separated from the role of external actors to compel its interest and project it through dominance, hegemony, and primacy (Bull 1977). In defining the relationships between states, Bull uses the term of preponderant state and subordinate states. Dominance can be understood as the involvement of extensive control by disregarding the international law, hegemony where preponderant states exercise coercion but gives looser control and in general maintain the norms of international law, while primacy exercising traditional diplomatic methods to gain influence. United Kingdom has been practicing primacy through its long standing strong global diplomatic network that is becoming a vital instrument for its influence overseas. The United Kingdom

through its integrated approach aims to use diplomacy as one of the tools to tackle global challenges, deliver credible deterrents, and project power globally. United Kingdom primacy aims to ensure innovative and effective support for its allies and partners globally through “*agility, speed of action and digital integration with a greater emphasis on engaging, training and assisting others*” (HM Government, Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. 2021, 7).

According to Samuel P. Huntington (Huntington 1993), primacy in international politics is concerned with primacy in power, which shows the ability of preponderant actors that is not limited to government and non-governmental bodies to influence the behaviour of more actors. Lasswell and Kaplan mentioned that the influence of policies varies according to the changes in prestige, influence has a second dimension in the form of the number of persons being influenced which is enlarged along with the development of communication technology, and lastly, the scope of influence implicated the values in the policies affected (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950, 73).

**Figure 1. Sphere of Influence by Hedley Bull**



Source: The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics (Bull 1977, 207)

As a soft power superpower country, the United Kingdom always puts diplomacy first, the influence and active approach that is projected globally aims to deliver the interest of the British people in the scope of:

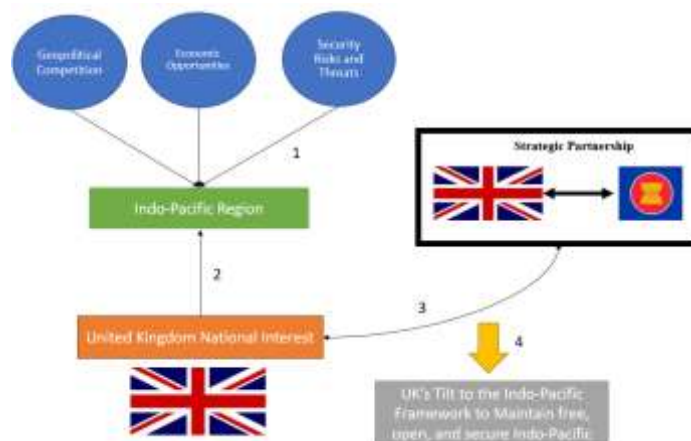
*“Sustaining the UK’s openness as a society and economy, a more robust position on security and deterrence, renewed commitment for good in the world by defending openness, democracy and human rights and increasing determination to seek multilateral solutions”* (HM Government, Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. 2021, 14)

The United Kingdom put diplomacy at the centre of its international efforts to safeguard national interest and counter state threats in the area of interest. The evolving strategic environment also encourages the United Kingdom to pursue an extensive multilateral agenda through strategic partnerships to ensure the UK’s influence and values are present in the area of interest. Further, Lasswell and Kaplan argue that power is comprised of influence, the exercise of influence comprises the weight (degree of policies affected), scope (the values that are influenced), and domain (the people who are influenced) (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950, 77). Power and influence are working simultaneously together, power is a type of influence, without

power, influence is questionable and without influence, power is enfeebled. In international relations, the phenomenon of strategic partnerships explores foreign-political influence and function in a geostrategic context that has become a major key to coping with systemic and issue-specific in the international environment (Tyushka and Czechowska 2019, 8). The strategic partnership became the system that represent a new principle for a more organized international order, evolving strategic environment requires a flexible form of polycentric cooperation. The idea of strategic partnership as a political toolkit both in foreign and defense policy has developed since the end of the Cold War, major power countries embrace partnerships because it offers flexibility and a more conducive environment to face the three contemporary factors such as economic globalization, non-state security threats, and nuclear weapons (Nadkarni 2010, 45). Further, due to their flexibility, strategic partnerships become very responsive to domestic, regional, and global environmental issues and interests with no binding or restriction to pursue similar partnerships with other multiple major power (Nadkarni 2010, 45).

The United Kingdom realizes that the future success of British global power remains on its integration with allies and partners. Hence, the United Kingdom engages more in the strategic environment area, in this case, the Indo-Pacific, in response to the regional balance of power while maintaining respect for other actors' interests in the region. In the Indo-Pacific region, the United Kingdom also seeks strategic partnerships with the existing structures in the area such as the Association of Southeast Asian Countries (ASEAN) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Due to the flexible nature of the strategic partnership, to attain their objectives under the Strategic Framework, the United Kingdom involves some significant changes and shifts in its policy especially in using regulatory diplomacy (HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. 2021, 21). Regulatory diplomacy's goal is to influence the rules, norms, and standards governing shaping the open international order of the future. United Kingdom's long-term prosperity ambition initiated three main goals in shaping the open international order of the future, first, support open societies and defend human rights, second, shape an open and resilient global economy, and third, shape the international order to remain accountable to protect United Kingdom interests (HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. 2021, 45).

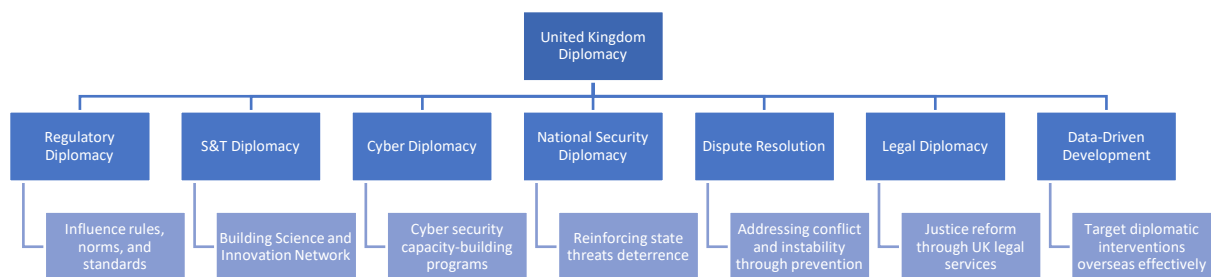
**Figure 2: The conceptual framework of the United Kingdom – ASEAN Strategic Partnership as part of the UK's tilt to the Indo-Pacific Framework.**



Source: Processed by Author, 2023

However, the strategic partnership does restrict any form of formal military alliances because the nature of alliances works against civilizational and structural factors at the regional level. Strategic partnerships enable Track I and Track II diplomacy to further explore common interests, goals, and concerns upon specific issues in the region. Considering the power shift in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Joseph S. Nye argued that the international environment become more complex where not only superpower countries play as dominant actors but the increasing influence of developing countries and non-governmental bodies altered the power shift as well (Nye 2023, 30). Further, he explained that power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century becomes three-dimensional, military power, economic power, and soft power (Nye 2023, 31).

**Figure 3: United Kingdom Diplomacy and Development Agenda: UK influence through soft power**



Source: HM Government Report (HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. 2021)

There are two shapes on how power is alternating in this century, power transition from West to East and power diffusion as indicated by the power shift from government to non-governmental actors. With new emerging transnational challenges such as climate change, transnational challenges, terrorism, and cyber security, any country in the world needs cooperation to solve the issues, instead of bringing the agenda of power over others, states should maximize power with others. It is interesting how strategic partnerships and power shifts work conjointly, both require states to maximize power with others to protect the national interest and deter risks in the area of strategic environment.

### 3. Research Methods

The method that used in this research is secondary qualitative research method. The qualitative research is using the secondary sources conducted in the form of literature review surrounding the discussion of soft power and the importance of Indo-Pacific region for United Kingdom such as books from Hedley Bull in *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, Samuel P. Huntington in *Why International Primacy Matters*, Harold and Kaplan's *Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry*, Vidya Nadkarni in *Strategic Partnerships in Asia: Balancing without alliances*, Joseph S Nye in *Understanding Twenty-First Century Power Shifts*, and Tyushka and Czechowska's *Strategic Partnerships, International Politics and IR Theory*. Official reports from the HM Government's integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy, the 2021 UK's defence tilt to the Indo-Pacific, UK's National strategy for maritime security, UK's policy paper on the Plan Action to Implement the ASEAN-United

Kingdom Dialogue Partnership (2022-2026) and the UK's 2023 Global Trade Outlook. Lastly, journal article from Gautam Sen in Strategic Relevance of the Indo-Pacific: An Assessment.

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1 United Kingdom Tilt to Indo-Pacific Framework: UK Means, Ways and Ends

After the United Kingdom departed from the European Union, the UK considered many new aspects of its domestic, foreign, and security policy. Brexit became the momentum of the UK to independently build and explore its security, defence, development, and foreign policy in the strategic area. With the ambition of becoming Europe's greatest and most persistent presence in the Indo-Pacific region, the UK is projecting a long-term strategic approach that adapts to the changing international environment. The shift in Indo-Pacific geopolitical and geoeconomics creates a systemic competition within the region that raises more complex challenges that are critical for the economy and security. The United Kingdom perceived the Indo-Pacific as a more contested international environment for geopolitical competition, a ground for conventional and non-conventional threats to emerge, one of the challenges is China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, and its military modernization creates a deterioration in the regional security environment. This is clearly against UK values in the Indo-Pacific to promote open societies and to uphold international rules that underpin free trade, security, and stability. The United Kingdom believes to deter risk and threats as well as to protect its national interest in the Indo-Pacific, the emergence of a middle power is very important. The security risks and threats are not only limited to military assertiveness, but also cover the area of unresolved territorial disputes, climate change, and terrorism. This means to maintain a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific, the United Kingdom has to work with allies, partners, and multilateral institutions through persistent engagement. The Indo-Pacific offers vast economic opportunities for the UK whereas the region already accounts for 17.5% of UK global trade and 10% of FDI inward (HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. 2021, 66). The Asia-Pacific region is also a growing market for the defense and security sector for the UK; the defense exports grew to six percent in 2019 while security exports accounted for 11 per cent (Brooke-Holland 2021, 9). United Kingdom's trade in the global maritime domain, especially in Asia depends on the shipping that goes through the Indo-Pacific Region, hence, stability in the region to preserve free trade and ensure smooth global cooperation is important.

United Kingdom's ambition to become the broadest and most integrated European partner with long-term commitment in the Indo-Pacific region is realized through its bilateral and multilateral partnerships such as ASEAN and the Pacific Island Forum. The partnerships are to ensure the United Kingdom is an open and liberal trade partner with reliability and integrity to address and give active engagement in international peace and security issues to the UK's globally focused area.

**Table 1: The United Kingdom prioritized cross-government engagement in the Asia-Pacific region.**

Actions	Result
Bilateral Trade Agreements with Australia and New Zealand, and Enhanced Trade Partnership with India.	Comprehensive trade deal with partners across the region.
Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.	Increased trade and investment opportunities, strengthening supply chain



	resilience with open trade and integration values.
Becoming ASEAN Dialogue Partner.	Support ASEAN’s central role in regional stability, sustainable development, and prosperity.
Strengthening defense and security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.	Enhanced engagement with Five Power Defense Arrangements (FPDA), increasing engagement with regional security grouping (ASEAN Political Security Community), and cyber security capacity building.
COP26 Strategy.	Adaptation and mitigation activity to tackle climate change in Indo-Pacific region. Development and sustainability programs in the major and growing emitters countries.
People-to people links	Bilateral and multilateral agenda to promote open societies and protecting public goods through conflict prevention, strong rule of law and humanitarian response.
Official Development Assistance	Strong and varied aid work to combat extreme poverty, providing returnable capital for mutual interest, and support of high-quality infrastructure.

Source: HM Government Report (HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. 2021)

The United Kingdom has actively invested a significant number of resources in the Indo-Pacific region. To safeguard the area to be in line with the UK’s favour, the UK has been actively increasing its maritime presence through capacity building and defence trade relationships as mentioned in the table (Brooke-Holland 2021, 9). In 2020, A new Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office General Director was appointed to increase its diplomatic network with ASEAN to deliver international engagement with different perspectives, analysis, expertise, and policy to the regional actor. This global strategic outlook helps the United Kingdom to implicate its national interest in the Indo-Pacific and project it through its national security and foreign policy.

#### **4.2 United Kingdom-ASEAN Strategic Partnership: Addressing Free and Open Indo-Pacific**

The Indo-Pacific region plays an important role for the United Kingdom, especially in supporting its economy growth. To ensure countries abide by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea as the legal framework for all activities carried out in the ocean, the United Kingdom emphasizes the importance of working with allies, partners, and multilateral institutions. Lies in the centre of The Indo-pacific region, Southeast Asia becomes the strategic environment for economic, political and security shifts in the area, hence, the effort to strengthen ties between United Kingdom and ASEAN is very crucial to protect UK’s interests in the region. On 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2012, The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation between UK and ASEAN was signed along with the ASEAN Outlook in the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) that was adopted in the 34<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit (UK Gov 2022). Later, in the 2022 ASEAN Summit, Cambodia UK and ASEAN produced the “Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-United Kingdom Dialogue Partnership (2022-2026)” to further addressing mutual concern, interest,



strengthening cooperation and coordination especially in The Asia-Pacific region. To support the plan action in the Asia-Pacific region, there are four key elements of concern in the AOIP, which are; maritime cooperation, connectivity, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030, and economic cooperation. United Kingdom and ASEAN are committed to develop and enhance any other cooperation to further contribute to peace, prosperity, and development in The Asia-Pacific Region. Below are some lists of UK and ASEAN cooperation priority areas in accordance of international law and respective domestic law in The Asia-Pacific region:

**Table 2: The Strategic Partnerships Areas of Priorities of ASEAN-UK in The Asia-Pacific Region**

Priority Areas	Activities
Political and Security	Develop and strengthen consultation and cooperation through regular ASEAN-UK Joint Cooperation Committee.
	Strengthen defence and security cooperation through UK's observer programmes in ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus
	Support open, transparent, inclusive ASEAN-led regional governance to engage with UK interests.
Peace and Reconciliation	Encourage experience sharing between United Kingdom and ASEAN in the areas of peace-building conflict, reconciliation through peaceful means through constructive engagements, workshops, and seminars.
Transnational Crime and Non-Traditional Security Issues	Enhance ASEAN-UK cooperation to tackle transnational organized crime.
	Encourage ASEAN-UK training centres to increase capabilities on law enforcement, violation preventive measures, and financial intelligence through transfer of technology and training programmes.
Maritime Cooperation	Promote the implementation of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea through maritime security capacity building efforts.
	Encourage collaborative cooperation in marine science area through regional network of maritime expertise and other relevant bodies.
	Enhance the cooperation in maritime safety and search and rescue activities in accordance to ASEAN Declaration on Cooperation in Search and Rescue of Persons and Vessels in Distress at sea through transfer of technology and information exchange between ASEAN and UK.
Good Governance and Human Right	Enhance capacity building to strengthening democracy, rule of law, human rights and

	fundamental freedom as well as good governance through sharing experience and knowledge between ASEAN and UK.
Environment and Climate Change	Advance cooperation of ASEAN and UK in sustainable management through the ASEAN Working Group on Climate Change Action Plan and the ASEAN Centre for Climate Change
Regional Economic Integration	Continue to support ASEAN regional economic development and prosperity through open, free, inclusive trading system in accordance to ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint and WTO rules.

Source: Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-United Kingdom Dialogue Partnership (2022-2026) (UK Gov 2022)

In the UK’s National Strategy for Maritime Security (HM Government, National Strategy for Maritime Security 2022), United Kingdom is aiming to championed and envisioned the United Nations Convention on the law of the Sea in Indo-Pacific areas along with its vital partners surrounding the region to ensure there is a limit of instability on the world’s ocean. United Kingdom is committed for a long-term partnership bilaterally and multilaterally to accommodate its national interest in Indo-Pacific trade routes. The list of UK-ASEAN strategic partnership priority areas addresses not only UK’s ambition to maximize UK’s vital trade routes through economy comparative advantage in the region but also promoting sustainable development and maritime security. Further, in the UK – ASEAN Plan of Action to implement dialogue partnership 2022-2026, it addresses seven key priorities area along with its activities to deliver its role as an ASEAN cross-government partner in Indo-Pacific as well as to pursue its goal as the broadest and most integrated European partner in the region.

## 5. Conclusions

United Kingdom’s strategic partnerships with ASEAN underly the mutual understanding and cooperation to realize UK’s interests in The Asia-Pacific region. With the increasing geopolitical and geostrategic shifts in the Indo-Pacific region, the rapid economic growth is expanding and the trend falls on the shift to the Indo-Pacific global trade, United Kingdom has been actively and continuously engaging with ASEAN as its vital regional partner through several activities in the priority areas. As a leading maritime nation, projecting its power beyond border is one of its values, hence, to maintain stability and security in the trade routes are crucial. United Kingdom possesses ambition for more agile foreign policy to engage with vital partners in the area of UK’s national interest. The Indo-Pacific region is really matter to United Kingdom, their national interest is aiming to maximize economic opportunities through new global trade arrangements while making sure the Indo-Pacific regional security is achieved through preserving freedom of navigation by working closely with vital partners for UK’s wider security capacity-building. The UK’s Tilt to the Indo-Pacific and ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific both serve as the foundation to secure the Indo-Pacific region for more open, free, and inclusive region for economic, political, and security purposes as well as the region of common interests to complement supporting initiatives. Considering the existing and future threats in the region such as growing aggressive presence of some major economic countries in the region, transnational crime and non-traditional security threats like piracy and organized crime, UK

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and ASEAN focus on enhancing and deploying soft power capabilities. Championing on its soft power as diplomacy tool, United Kingdom plays its best role in the development of science and technology through capacity building and transfer of knowledge to enhance ASEAN function to support UK's interest in The Asia-Pacific Region. The UK-ASEAN Dialogue Partnership Plan Action is a work-on-progress that further underpinning UK's presence commitment in the ASEAN and Indo-Pacific region to ensure future success in implementing its values and goals while reflecting challenges and key priorities action that linked to a well-ordered strategic partnership.

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