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THE REORIENTATION OF THE UNITED KINGDOM'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE INDO-PACIFIC: A NEOCLASSICAL REALIST ANALYSIS

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini menganalisis reorientasi kebijakan luar negeri Inggris terhadap kawasan Indo-Pasifik selama periode 2021–2023. Realisme neoklasik Gideon Rose digunakan sebagai kerangka analisis, dengan mengaplikasikan konsep perimbangan kekuatan dan politik domestik. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa baik faktor domestik maupun faktor sistemik regional mendorong reorientasi kebijakan luar negeri tersebut. Bagaimana dinamika internal, khususnya politik domestik, serta tekanan eksternal seperti kompetisi geopolitik dan keamanan di Indo-Pasifik membentuk orientasi strategis Inggris menjadi sorotan dalam artikel ini. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif eksplanatif, artikel ini mengintegrasikan tinjauan pustaka dan wawancara pakar untuk memberikan wawasan yang lebih mendalam mengenai kebijakan luar negeri Inggris. Tujuannya adalah menjelaskan bagaimana kondisi domestik dan struktur internasional berinteraksi dalam memengaruhi reorientasi fokus kebijakan luar negeri Inggris. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Inggris berupaya mencari peluang ekonomi dan perdagangan di Indo-Pasifik sekaligus memperkuat posisinya secara strategis di tingkat global. Bukti dari reorientasi kebijakan ini tampak dalam partisipasi Inggris pada aliansi seperti AUKUS serta perluasan kerja sama ekonomi dengan negara-negara Indo-Pasifik.

Kata kunci: Inggris, Indo-Pasifik, Realisme Neoklasik, Perimbangan Kekuatan, Politik Domestik

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the reorientation of the United Kingdom's foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific during 2021–2023. Gideon Rose's neoclassical realism serves as the analytical framework, applying concepts of balance of power and domestic politics. This article argues that both domestic and regional systemic factors drive the foreign policy reorientation. It highlights how internal dynamics, particularly domestic politics, as well as external pressures such as geopolitical competition and security in the Indo-Pacific shape the United Kingdom's strategic orientation. Employing an explanatory qualitative approach, this article integrates literature review and expert interviews to provide deeper insights into the United Kingdom's foreign policy. The objective is to explain how domestic conditions and international structures interact to influence the reorientation of focus of the United Kingdom's foreign policy. Research findings reveal that the United Kingdom seeks economic and trade opportunities in the Indo-Pacific while reinforcing its strategic position globally. Evidence of this policy reorientation appears in United Kingdom's participation in alliances like AUKUS and in expanding economic cooperation with Indo-Pacific states.

Keywords: United Kingdom, Indo-Pacific, Neoclassical Realism, Balance of Power, Domestic Politics

BACKGROUND

The United Kingdom (UK) has been among the most active states in Europe in terms of policy responses, both for its affairs in Europe and outside Europe. UK political actors, including political parties, ministries, and defense institutions, frequently act proactively in responding to strategic issues, both in pursuit of domestic interests and in advancing global agendas. Since 1949, the UK has been actively engaged in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Being the second-largest donor to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan in 2003 is one noteworthy illustration of the UK's important role within NATO (Ministry of Defence 2014). The UK's close partnership with NATO has been one of the factors influencing its involvement in foreign policy decisions in the Middle East.

In 2014, the UK and Bahrain reached an agreement to enhance facilities at Mina Salman Port, intended for planning, equipment storage, and accommodating Royal Navy personnel. Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond signed an allocation of 15 million pounds for the construction of the base. This initiative was undertaken to strengthen stability in the Gulf region and to address shared strategic and regional threats in cooperation with Bahrain (BBC 2014). The construction of the military facility was completed in 2018, establishing the UK's presence at seven strategic locations across the Indian Ocean: Kenya, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Diego Garcia, Singapore, and Brunei Darussalam (Roy-Chaudhury 2021).

In 2019, the UK sent out Her Majesty's Ship (HMS) Duncan and HMS Montrose in response to Iranian authorities detaining the tanker Stena Impero, which was flying the UK flag. The presence of these warships was intended to protect a secure transit corridor for merchant vessels, particularly those flying the UK flag, navigating the Strait of Hormuz. This measure also aimed to safeguard critical economic routes, including approximately 25 percent of liquefied natural gas, 20 percent of global oil supplies, and trade valued at half a trillion United States (US) dollars belonging to the UK that passes through these waters annually (Foreign & Commonwealth Office 2019b).

This phenomenon demonstrates that the UK tended to prioritize its foreign policy in the Middle East, which is also reflected in the *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015* (NSS & SDSR 2015), published by the UK Government in 2015. Within this document, the UK's foreign policy points concerning the Middle East include the escalation of external threats, the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, and the instability across the region (The Prime Minister and Command of Her Majesty 2015).

Following a Brexit referendum in 2016, the UK formally left the European Union (EU) on January 31, 2020. The transition phase that followed the referendum concluded on December 31, 2020. With the UK's departure, various regulations and international agreements, such as free trade arrangements previously implemented under the EU, ceased to apply to the UK (BBC 2021). This situation opened strategic opportunities for the UK to formulate new policies independently, with greater emphasis on advancing its national interests.

In a different region of the globe, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as the center of global economic growth and geopolitical contention in the 21st century. Economically, the region accounts for a substantial share of global supply chains, trade flows, and manufacturing networks. Politically and strategically, the Indo-Pacific has become a focal point of major power rivalry, particularly between the US and China. China's rapid economic rise, military modernization, assertiveness in the South China Sea, and superpower ambition have intensified regional security dilemmas and encouraged external powers to strengthen their strategic engagement in the region (Heiduk and Wacker 2020; Li 2020; Anggraini et al. 2023).

For the UK, the Indo-Pacific is not only an emerging economic hub but also a strategically important region for maintaining global influence after Brexit. Having lost access to the European common market, the UK needs to build economic partnerships with emerging markets in other regions. The Indo-Pacific region offers opportunities for trade diversification, investment expansion, diplomatic partnerships, and maritime security cooperation with major and middle powers, including India, Japan, Australia, and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states. Consequently, the UK's Indo-Pacific orientation symbolizes both economic imperatives and geopolitical calculations within the broader 'Global Britain' agenda (Pant and Milford 2021; Puri 2024).

In 2021, the UK sought to launch Carrier Strike Group 2021 (CSG21) as part of the 'Global Britain' strategy. Global Britain embodies the UK Government's vision to revive the country's global engagement after Brexit (UK Parliament 2020). The mission was spearheaded by the aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth, accompanied by several destroyers, anti-submarine frigates, logistic support vessels, and allied contributions. Over the course of 28 weeks, the fleet was scheduled to visit more than 40 countries and conduct approximately 70 activities, including joint exercises commemorating 50 years of defense cooperation under the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) (Sky News 2021).

The UK, along with Australia and the US, virtually declared a new trilateral cooperation called AUKUS on September 15, 2021. The three national leaders declared that AUKUS aims to safeguard regional stability and peace in the Indo-Pacific (Prime Minister's Office 2021). Through AUKUS, the UK and the US are committed to assisting Australia acquire nuclear-powered submarines for its navy and to enhancing Australia's capabilities in quantum technology, artificial intelligence, cyber, and undersea patrols (The White House 2021; Oktavianto 2023, 198; Saputro, Ulung, Abdurrohim, et al. 2024, 14–15).

Citing Gilli (2019), the UK has participated in several bilateral trade initiatives in the military industry since 2013. One of which has positioned it as Japan's second-largest arms supplier behind the US. The UK Government has also conducted bilateral discussions with South Korea, New Zealand, China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Australia, and other Asia-Pacific countries through the EU in relation to trade. Moreover, after the EU and the US, China has become the UK's third-largest trading partner. The UK Government has further set its target to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Contemplating the aforementioned developments, the UK appears to have begun expanding its foreign policy orientation. The authors conclude that between approximately 2014 and 2020, the UK's foreign policy was more focused on the Middle East, emphasizing the strategic significance of the Gulf region and maritime navigation. The authors observe that the UK has started to extend its influence towards Asia, particularly in addressing security issues, including its participation in AUKUS. In 2022, reports from the Royal United Services Institute and the UK Foreign Affairs Committee indicated that the Middle East was losing priority within the UK's foreign policy, while the UK's focus shifted towards the Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, these reports emphasized that the increased attention to the Indo-Pacific should not come at the expense of the UK's longstanding commitments in the Middle East (Foreign Affairs Committee 2023; Borck 2023).

The reorientation of the UK's foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific raises important questions for scholarly inquiry. The UK Government has actively redirected its foreign policy focus to this region post-Brexit, encompassing trade, defense, and security sectors. Behind this shift lies the need to understand the rationale for the UK's foreign policy reorientation towards the Indo-Pacific. This research is particularly relevant given the rapidly evolving geopolitical dynamics of the region, which exert significant influence on the global order. Furthermore, the application of neoclassical realism is well-suited to this study.

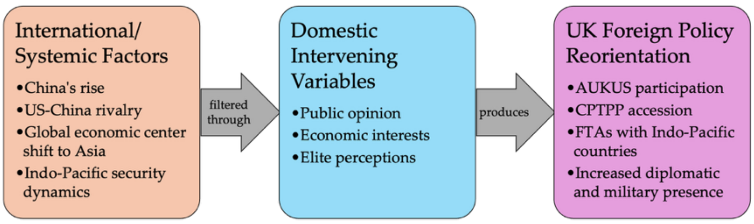
ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Neoclassical realism is an approach that elucidates foreign policy as the outcome of pressures from the international system, mediated by domestic variables. Conceptually, neoclassical realism views foreign policy as the outcome of the interaction between systemic factors and intervening variables of a domestic nature. States formulate foreign policy based on how they think of threats and opportunities within the international system, which are subsequently filtered through domestic capacities and political leadership.

Rose (1998, 154) argues that neoclassical realism emerged from the synthesis of *innenpolitik* theory, offensive realism, and defensive realism. *Innenpolitik* emphasizes the influence of domestic factors such as ideology, political parties, socio-economic structures, and national character in shaping foreign policy. However, this approach struggles to explain differences in foreign policy among states with similar internal systems (Eckstein 2006, 73; Patman 2006, 38). Offensive realism, as advanced by Mearsheimer, posits that states seek to strengthen security and relative power through expansionist policies aimed at weakening potential rivals. Hegemony becomes the ultimate goal, although expansion strategies vary depending on geography and military traditions of each state (Lobell 2002, 166). In contrast, defensive realism, as articulated by Waltz, assumes that security is abundant, leading states to maintain a balance of power through defensive strategies. The international system encourages moderation for the sake of stability, while expansion is only advantageous under certain conditions, as it risks triggering security dilemmas and new conflicts (Lobell 2017; Rose 1998, 150).

Rose (1998) criticizes *innenpolitik*, offensive realism, and defensive realism for neglecting the influence of relative power on foreign policy. He proposes neoclassical realism as an alternative approach that integrates both external and internal factors, emphasizing that systemic pressures must be interpreted in accordance with intervening variables, such as policymakers' perceptions and domestic politics. According to Ripsman et al. (2016, 33–35), neoclassical realists argue that states are the primary units in the international system, which cannot always adjust their policies to situations abroad. This is due to misperceptions about stimuli from the system, irrational decision-making processes, or obstacles in policy implementation caused by failures in mobilizing human resources. They believe that a country's relative material capabilities determine the extent and aspirations of its foreign policy.

Figure 1.
Neoclassical Realist Framework of UK Foreign Policy Reorientation towards the Indo-Pacific



Source: Adapted by the authors from Rose (1998)

In line with the neoclassical realist framework, Figure 1 illustrates that foreign policy outcomes are not directly determined by systemic pressures. Rather, the systemic pressures are mediated by domestic intervening variables that shape the perceptions and strategic responses of policymakers (Rose 1998; Ripsman et al. 2016). Hence, to strengthen this study, the authors employ two concepts: balance of power and domestic politics. According to Walt (1987, 18–19), the balance of power depends on how states choose their alliances. States may ally against a major threat (balancing) or align with a major power to avoid confrontation with that threat (bandwagoning). The balance of power concept helps to analyze the power distribution and the international system. Meanwhile, domestic politics is applied to examine the domestic dimension, including public opinion, media, trade, bureaucratic interests, military organizations, political leaders, and coalitions, as well as national identity and culture (Foyle and Van Belle 2017, 377; Baylis et al. 2023, 145). Since domestic politics serve as a 'filter' through which everything that occurs within the international system is perceived, this concept is therefore crucial to neoclassical realism (Darmawan et al. 2025, 214).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative method. The qualitative method investigates and comprehends the importance that groups or individuals attach to a social issue. This study includes questions and methods development, data collection in the participants' environment, inductive data analysis, and the data significance assessment (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 41). The analysis relies on secondary data drawn from academic journals, interviews with scholars, official documents, news reports, and third-party publications.

The research type employed in this paper is explanatory research. Explanatory research is a research type whose main goals are to develop, refine, expand, or test theories as well as to explain why certain things happen (Neuman 2014, 40). For data collection, the authors relied on secondary data obtained from academic journals, government policy documents, parliamentary debates, think tank reports, official statistics, and reputable international news sources. Data collection was conducted between May 2024 and February 2025.

To strengthen the analysis, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with several experts in international relations and European studies. The interview informants included Prof. Evi Fitriani (Professor of International Relations at Universitas Indonesia) and Dr. Sophiana Widiastutie (expert in European studies from Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jakarta). The interviews focused on the UK's strategic interests, perceptions of China, post-Brexit foreign policy adjustments, and the relevance of Indo-Pacific for the UK.

DISCUSSION

Geographical Definition and Regional Composition of the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific accommodates two-thirds of the world's population, serving as the hub of global trade, geopolitics, geoeconomics, and regional cooperation, while simultaneously confronting issues of climate change, military expansion, piracy, and maritime conflicts. Its geographical scope encompasses the Western and Central Pacific, the South and East China Seas, and the Indian Ocean (Pant and Milford 2021, 3; Pedrason 2021, 89; Yadav 2022, 1–7; Oktavianto 2023, 168). In this century, the Indo-

Pacific, which boasts the world's fastest economic growth, has emerged as a crucial hub for global collaboration (Heiduk and Wacker 2020, 5). The region also functions as a stage for power competition, while offering opportunities for major states outside the region to respond to security threats and economic prospects, in line with China's accelerating economic growth that expands its influence across the Indo-Pacific (Yadav 2022, 10).

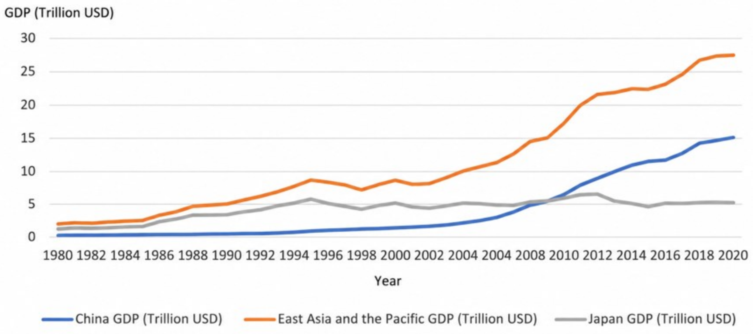
The Indo-Pacific is a broadening term of the Asia-Pacific. The UK Government defines countries within the Indo-Pacific region as those in Oceania, Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean (UK Parliament 2022). In an interview with Prof. Fitriani, she explained that the Indo-Pacific is an old term that, at the time, was not viewed through a geopolitical lens. Since the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) formation, however, the Indo-Pacific has come to be seen more politically than economically, particularly since the Quad introduced the *Indo-Pacific Strategy*. Moreover, China's presence in this area, combined with its rapid economic and military development, has made it a major risk to the West (Evi Fitriani, "The UK's Engagement with the Indo-Pacific and Its Interests in the Region," February 7, 2025).

Although debate initially emerged regarding the use of the term 'Asia-Pacific' versus 'Indo-Pacific,' the Indo-Pacific terminology has progressively become the dominant geopolitical framework adopted by major powers and regional institutions. Countries such as India, Japan, Australia, the US, and the UK officially employ the term in their strategic documents and foreign policy frameworks (Heiduk and Wacker 2020). The concept gained a broader regional acceptance when ASEAN adopted the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* in 2019 (ASEAN 2019). Therefore, the term Indo-Pacific in this article is not just an analytical choice by the authors but also reflects prevailing strategic terminology in contemporary global politics.

Changes in the Distribution of Economy and Security in the Indo-Pacific

Economically, the Indo-Pacific experienced continuous growth in its gross domestic product (GDP) between 2019 and 2023. In 2019, the region recorded a figure of 27.3 trillion US dollars, which increased to 31.2 trillion US dollars in 2023. This represents a rise of 14.29 percent (World Bank, n.d.).

Figure 2.
GDP Growth in East Asia and the Pacific, China, and Japan, 1980–2020



Source: World Bank (n.d.)

As cited World Bank (n.d.) in Figure 2, it is evident that the GDP growth of the East Asia and Pacific region has been supported by China's continuously increasing GDP. In contrast, Japan has not experienced any further GDP growth since 2013. Over the span of forty years (1980–2020), China recorded a GDP percentage increase of approximately 7.75 percent, rising from 191 billion to 15 trillion, while East Asia registered an increase of about 1.38 percent, from 1.85 trillion to 27.47 trillion US dollars.

The ERIA Research Project (Prakash et al. 2023, 7) revealed that the fifteen member states of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) contributed 26.3 trillion US dollars to the global GDP. This explains why the US and the EU, including the UK, are interested in partnering with this region through its economic potential, namely production facilities, markets, and human resources.

Conversely, China's economic rise has also influenced its military domain. Zulkifli et al. (2023) identified five areas of modernization undertaken by China. *First*, the strengthening of its navy and army. *Second*, the enhancement of command, control, and military operations. *Third*, the deployment of electronic, cyber, and space warfare as strategic support forces. *Fourth*, the advancement of military intelligence technology. *Fifth*, the promotion of domestic industry through the *Made in China 2025* strategy.

China has frequently engaged in aggressive actions in its surrounding areas, including Taiwan and the South China Sea. China has unilaterally asserted claims rooted in the Nine-Dash Line to the South China Sea (Adhi 2021). Since 2021, the frequency and scope of China's military patrols surrounding Taiwan have also risen. The Taiwanese Government has further reported thousands of cyberattacks originating from China (Maizland and Fong 2025).

The rise of China's economy and its military modernization have shifted the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and heightened maritime tensions in Taiwan and the South China Sea. China's enhancement of infrastructure, economic, and defense capabilities has generated regional instability, suspicion, and perceived threats on the part of the US and its allies, prompting their presence as a means to counterbalance China's clout (Türkcan 2022; Saputro, Ulung, and Abdurrohim 2024, 2104). The West views China's actions as an attempt at hegemony in Asia, which, according to Li (2020), undermines US geopolitical interests by reshaping the global landscape, shifting strategic priorities, and diminishing the significance of US naval supremacy in the region.

In the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, it is stated that the US government engages its allies in Asia, such as Australia, Japan, and India, as well as its traditional European ally, the UK (The White House 2017, 3 & 46). This strategy aims to strengthen the bargaining position of the US and its allies in reducing China's clout. The US balancing mechanisms are manifested through alliances and coalitions such as the Quad and AUKUS, alongside increased military, diplomatic, and cybersecurity engagement.

UK's Presence in the Indo-Pacific

The UK's Indo-Pacific position includes economic collaboration with a number of regional partners in addition to its involvement in AUKUS and its unique connection with the US. The UK has been able to independently determine its economic policy direction post-Brexit. The UK government has expressed interest in multilateral accords like the CPTPP and has attempted to target the Indo-Pacific region for bilateral free trade agreements (Gilli 2019, 44). During his visit to Singapore in 2019, Jeremy Hunt emphasized the importance of the UK's relations with Asian nations, including ASEAN, particularly in matters of economics, trade, and democracy. Hunt also noted that the global economic center of gravity has shifted to Asia. This is demonstrated by the fact that, with ASEAN trade totaling 37 billion pounds, the UK is the biggest European investor in Southeast Asia (Foreign & Commonwealth Office 2019a).

From the UK Government's perspective, the Indo-Pacific is currently viewed primarily through a geopolitical lens, influenced by China's assertiveness as well as its rivalry with the US, which seeks to balance China's influence in the region (Saputro, Ulung, Abdurrohim, et al. 2024, 13). In terms of security, the UK's involvement in AUKUS provides a legal platform in the Indo-Pacific for advancing global security interests. At the same time, the UK also relies on its economic cooperation in the region. Thus, the UK perceives the Indo-Pacific in two dimensions: in terms of security as a US ally and in terms of the region's economic prospects.

From a neoclassical realism standpoint, this reflects how the international system operates. Systemic pressures include China's military and economic growth, its rivalry with the US, and the Indo-Pacific economic potential. The neoclassical realist viewpoint, however, holds that the UK's foreign policy stance toward the Indo-Pacific is not always determined by these systemic factors alone. It is also necessary to analyze the domestic factors that affect the UK's foreign policy decisions.

Neoclassical realism contends that the results of foreign policy cannot be adequately explained by systemic pressures alone. States do not automatically react uniformly to opportunities and threats from the outside world. Domestic political conditions, elite perceptions, and societal pressures influence how policymakers interpret and respond to international developments. Therefore, understanding the UK's presence in the Indo-Pacific also requires examining the domestic political environment that shapes the UK's foreign policy behavior.

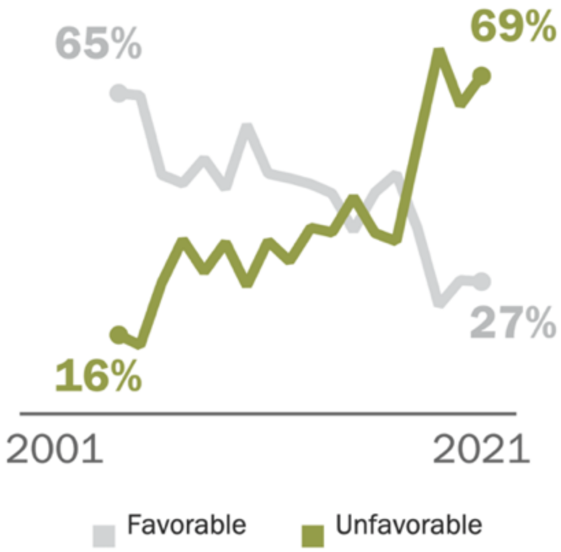
UK Domestic Politics towards the Indo-Pacific

To understand the domestic context of the UK, it is necessary to recognize that public opinion, economic interests, and differing elite perceptions can influence the shaping of the UK's domestic politics. Those three domestic factors will be discussed in depth below.

UK Public Opinion on the Indo-Pacific

Within neoclassical realism, public perception constitutes an important intervening variable because it shapes the domestic legitimacy of foreign policy decisions. Public opinion may shape or constrain foreign policy. It may influence policymakers' threat perceptions, electoral calculations, and strategic priorities (Baum and Potter 2008, 41–43). In democratic states such as the UK, negative perceptions toward another country can encourage governments to adopt firmer security policies, while positive perceptions may support continued cooperation.

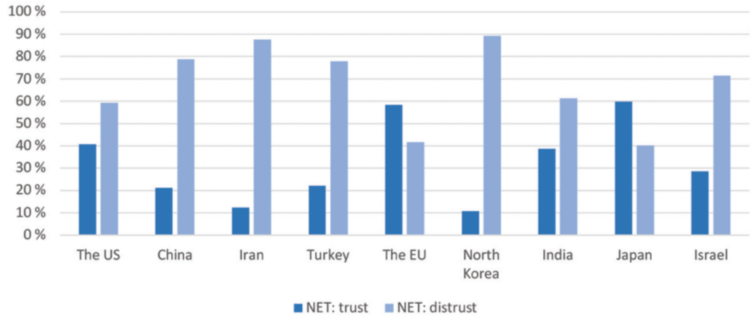
Figure 3.
Level of UK Public Perception of China



Source: Silver et al. (2022)

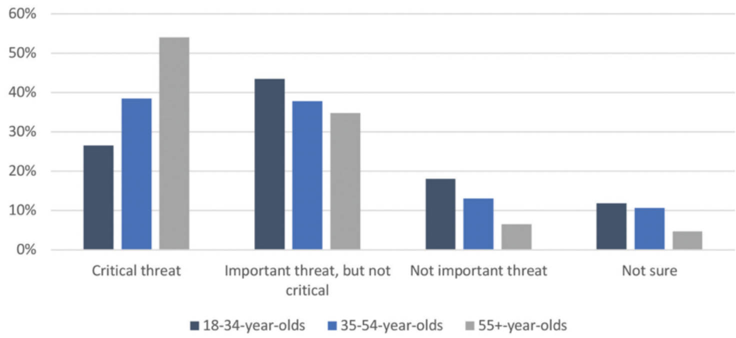
In Figure 3, the Pew Research Center reported that negative public perceptions in the UK towards China have grown over the past 10 years (Silver et al. 2022). In 2021, 69 percent of the UK public viewed China unfavorably. Furthermore, the institute also recorded in 2020 that 47 percent of the UK public agreed that China is the world's largest economic power, while 37 percent stated that the US holds that position.

Figure 4.
Respondents' Assessment of Those Countries' Trust in Acting Responsibly in the World



Source: Gaston (2020, 39)

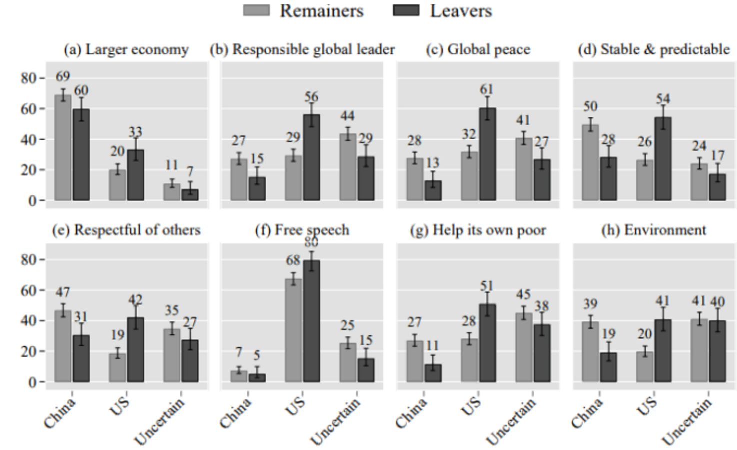
Figure 5.
Proportion of UK Citizens Who Perceive China's Rise as a Threat



Source: Gaston and Aspinall (2021, 79)

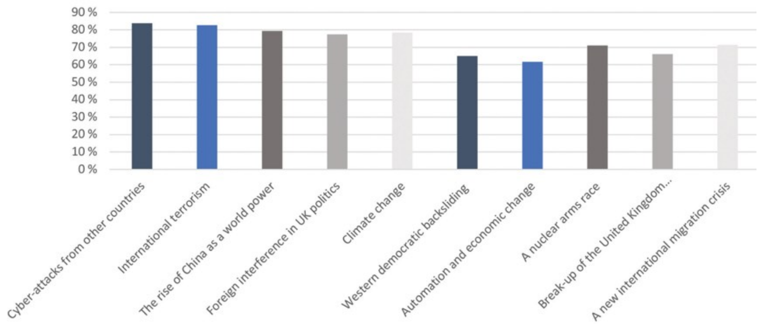
In another survey presented in Figure 4, the British Foreign Policy Group reported that 79 percent of the UK public did not trust China to act responsibly in global affairs, while only 21 percent expressed trust in China. In 2021, the British Foreign Policy Group ran another survey. As shown in Figure 5, 40.33 percent of the UK public perceived China's rise as a critical threat, and 38.66 percent considered it an important threat. The remainder viewed it as neither a significant threat nor were uncertain (Gaston 2020, 39; Gaston and Aspinall 2021, 78–80).

Figure 6.
Brexit Identities and Views of the US and China



Source: Chow et al. (2019, 1385)

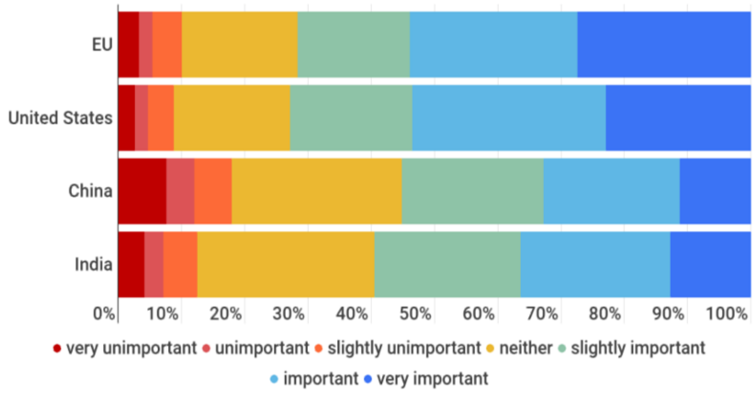
Figure 7.
Percentage of UK Citizens Who Believe These Events and Issues Pose 'Important' or 'Critical' Threats to the Country's Security During the Next 10 Years



Source: Gaston and Aspinall (Gaston and Aspinall 2021, 78)

In Figure 6, Chow et al. (2019, 1385–86) presented data dividing respondents into '*Leavers*' — those who supported Brexit — and '*Remainers*' — those who wished to stay in the EU. The majority of the UK public held negative views of China regarding its military power. However, they also regarded China as the largest economic power, even more stable than the US. Yet, in matters of peace, the US continued to be perceived as the defender of international peace and a responsible global leader. In Figure 7, within the same institution, Gaston and Aspinall (2021, 78–80) reported that 79 percent of the UK's public once again viewed China's ascent as a global power.

Figure 8.
UK Public Perception on the Significance of the Free Trade Agreements with the Following Countries/Entities After Brexit



Source: Summers et al. (2020, 12)

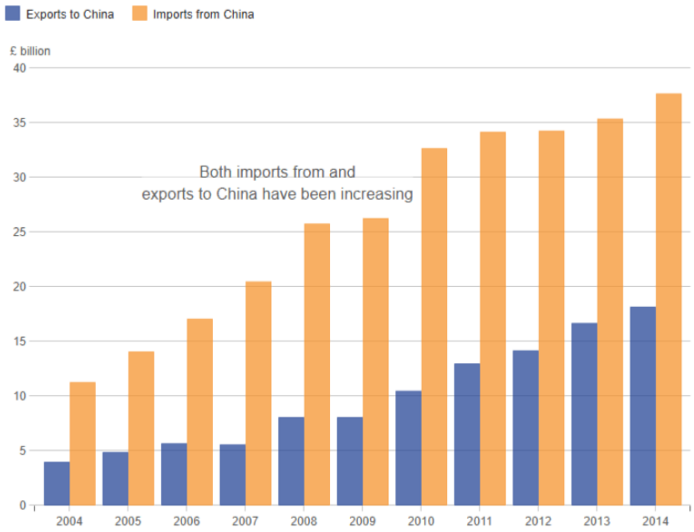
In Figure 8, the Central European Institute of Asian Studies' survey findings indicated that overall, the UK public considered China to be an important country for pursuing free trade in the post-Brexit era (Summers et al. 2020, 4 & 12). Taken together, these surveys demonstrate that the dominant sentiment among the UK public is skepticism and suspicion towards China. This distrust is particularly evident in the political, security, and international behavioral dimensions of China's actions. The UK public places greater trust in the role of the US in political and security matters than in China. On the economic side, however, the economic potential presented by the Indo-Pacific remains to pique the attention of the UK public. Thus, although China is seen as a threat, its economic role is acknowledged as significant, including as the UK's partner.

UK Economic Interests in the Indo-Pacific

Economic interests play a major role in shaping foreign policy because states seek to secure trade access, investment opportunities, supply chain resilience, and long-term economic growth (Foulon 2015, 654). From a neoclassical realist perspective, economic needs become domestic intervening variables that affect how governments react in response to systemic changes. Post-Brexit economic adjustments increased the importance of diversifying trade partnerships for the UK beyond Europe, making the Indo-Pacific strategically valuable.

Following Brexit, the UK Government has had greater opportunities to experiment and actively seek new markets, as the country can no longer rely solely on intra-European and trans-Atlantic trade. Within the context of this study, strengthening economic relations with China has become one of the key avenues of diversification. The Office for National Statistics (2015) recorded that since 2004, China has become a more significant trading partner for the UK over time, marked by the expansion of import and export values.

Figure 9.
Trade in Goods and Services between the UK and China, 2004–2014

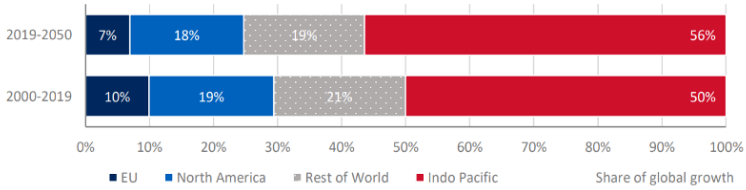


Source: Office for National Statistics (2015)

According to data from the Office for National Statistics (2015), as seen in Figure 9, between 2004 and 2014, the UK consistently developed and expanded its trade relations with China. Market share data show that China's contribution to UK imports rose significantly from 3.3 percent in 2004 to 7 percent in 2014, placing China second among non-EU import partners after the US. Conversely, UK imports of services and goods from China increased from 11.3 billion pounds in 2004 to 37.7 billion pounds in 2014. The bilateral trade deficit reached 19.5 billion pounds in 2014, making it the UK's second-largest deficit after Germany.

UK–China relations once experienced a 'golden era.' Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the UK, with both sides promoting cooperation in trade and investment. The UK also unilaterally participated in the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Chow et al. 2019, 1373). Mark Field stated that the UK's policy towards China aimed to enhance bilateral trade and investment, while also fostering cooperation on education, health, climate, tourism, development, and regional security (UK Parliament 2019).

Figure 10.
Real-Term Regional Factors Affecting Global Economic Growth



Source: Department for Business and Trade & Department for International Trade (2021, 7)

The Department for Business and Trade and the Department for International Trade (2021, 7) projected that the global demand shift towards the East will continue until 2050. As seen in Figure 10, between 2019 and 2050, approximately 56 percent of total world economic growth is predicted to originate from the Indo-Pacific, while the EU and North America combined will contribute only one-quarter. Growth patterns in the Indo-Pacific are expected to adjust, with South Asia, particularly India, playing an increasingly significant role over time. Moreover, China is regarded as the primary driver of this global economic shift. Projections suggest that between 2030 and 2050, China's economy will surpass the US in terms of purchasing power parity (Department for Business and Trade and Department for International Trade 2021, 9).

During his visit to Singapore in 2019, Hunt highlighted the importance of the UK's ties with Asian nations, emphasizing economic, trade, and democracy issues as his focus (Foreign & Commonwealth Office 2019a). Graham Stuart argued that the UK Government's plan towards the Indo-Pacific would involve investments of 180 billion pounds in the region and 151 billion pounds in the UK. Free trade activities and market access are expected to foster a more favorable bilateral investment environment (UK Parliament 2021d).

Summers et al. (2020) argued that at the structural level, the global economic center of gravity has gradually shifted towards the Global South and Asia. The region has undergone significant economic and social transformation, building new socio-cultural, economic, and political linkages. Summers et al. (2020) also noted that the UK has adopted the term *'tilt to the Indo-Pacific'* to describe its broader engagement to Asia. This includes regional institutional engagement, ranging from ASEAN to the CPTPP, alongside the UK policy adjustments towards China and its initiatives.

As of the writing, the UK has agreed on trade agreements with several Indo-Pacific countries. Examples include economic cooperation with Australia (Prime Minister's Office and Department for International Trade 2021) and New Zealand (Department for International Trade and Prime Minister's Office 2021) through Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), with Singapore (Department for International Trade and Secretary of State for International Trade 2022) through a Digital Economy Agreement, and with Japan (Department for Business and Trade and Department for International Trade 2020) through the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).

Gerard Grimstone and Elizabeth Truss stated in 2021 that the UK Government was negotiating with the eleven member states of the CPTPP to join this multilateral trade agreement. The UK's admission to the CPTPP was expected to accelerate economic expansion, thereby creating more employment opportunities in the UK. The agreement is progressive and comprehensive, with deep coverage of national priorities such as the services sector and digital trade. It is also intended to secure enhanced opportunities for trade and investment (Grimstone 2021; Truss 2021).

The Department for International Trade (2020), in its official statistics, reported that the primary export market focus of UK industries was the Asia-Pacific region, which recorded export values of 0.82 billion pounds. The Office for National Statistics (2020) noted that UK exports to Asia reached 21.4 billion pounds in 2015 and 28.7 billion pounds in 2018. For imports from Asia, the figures stood at 9 billion pounds in 2015, increasing by 4.5 billion pounds in 2018.

The above data illustrate both the economic role of the UK and the role of its governing elites. UK policymakers viewed Brexit as an opportunity to move beyond dependence on intra-European and trans-Atlantic markets. Political elites such as Field, Truss, and Grimstone emphasized the importance of bilateral cooperation with China in trade and global issues. The signing of FTAs with Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Singapore, along with the UK's interest in joining the CPTPP, represents a strategic step in shaping the UK's Indo-Pacific economic policy direction.

In an interview, Dr. Widiastutie stated that the UK's reorientation toward the Indo-Pacific is driven by a desire to expand its markets. The UK is a fairly pragmatic country in economic matters. In fact, the UK's entry into the EU in the past was also primarily driven by market considerations (Sophiana Widiastutie, "The UK Perspective on the Dynamics of the Indo-Pacific Region," January 31, 2025).

Differences in Elite Perception in the UK Regarding the Indo-Pacific

China became the dominant factor in the UK debates on the Indo-Pacific because it simultaneously represents both a strategic challenge and an economic opportunity. China's military modernization, assertiveness in regional disputes, technological advancement, and growing global influence have intensified concerns among UK policymakers regarding regional stability and the future balance of power. At the same time, China remains an important trading partner for the UK (Puri 2024). This duality explains why perceptions of China significantly shape debates among the UK political elites.

Within the UK's internal political system, there are two dominant parties: the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. According to Breslin and Burnham (2023, 407–8), the UK's orientation towards the Indo-Pacific has been fluctuating. During Conservative-led governments, the UK maintained close relations with China, peaking in 2015–2016. Citing Simon McDonald in Breslin and Burnham (2023, 408), the UK policy in 2010 regarded China as an economic power and potential partner. Puri (2024, 73) similarly argued that the UK prioritized commercial engagement and security interests in the Indo-Pacific.

James Heappey acknowledged the Indo-Pacific importance for prosperity, global security, strengthening defense cooperation and dialogue, and reaffirming commitments to partners and allies in the region (UK Parliament 2021c). Likewise, Baroness Goldie stated plans to build a UK maritime existence in the Indo-Pacific, aligning with the strategic tilt outlined in the *Integrated Review 2021*.

During Boris Johnson's premiership, the government sought to maintain relations with Beijing, motivated by the UK's interest in expanding business cooperation with China while limiting Chinese corporate involvement in sensitive national security issues. Together with Rishi Sunak, Johnson approved the establishment of the Joint Economic and Trade Committee and the UK–China Economic and Financial Dialogue. In contrast, Liz Truss adopted a tougher stance, diplomatically boycotting the Beijing Winter Olympics and withdrawing UK judges from Hong Kong over concerns about restrictions on freedoms. Meanwhile, Kwasi Kwarteng sought to reduce UK dependence on China, including in lithium supply (Courea 2022).

Brexit and Conservative leadership changes influenced the emergence of views framing China as a threat. Dissatisfaction arose with the policies of David Cameron and George Osborne, who had sought closer ties with China. These policies were later realigned with US priorities to safeguard investment and maintain FTAs with Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore in the post-Brexit era (Breslin and Burnham 2023, 412; Webb 2025). Truss succeeded Johnson as Prime Minister, pledging to designate China as a threat, but her 49-day tenure ended before implementation. While maintaining flexibility for collaboration in certain areas, such as economic security, Sunak restated similar pledges, highlighting China as a long-term threat and the value of alliances in combating its actions (Prime Minister's Office 2022; Allegretti and Ni 2022; Breslin and Burnham 2023, 413).

Despite worsening views of China, the UK continued its focus on the Indo-Pacific. Nigel Adams stressed the UK's engagement in the region's importance for economic, security, and national values. Foreign Secretary visits to Asia in the 2020s strengthened cooperation with South Korea and Vietnam. The UK also applied for ASEAN Dialogue Partner status and joined the CPTPP to deepen political ties (UK Parliament 2021b).

In his 2022 speech at Guildhall, London, Sunak emphasized the Indo-Pacific's vast opportunities and the importance of long-term partnerships. He predicted that the region would be responsible for almost half of the world's growth by the 2050s. The UK's existence in the FPDA and AUKUS demonstrated its support for Indo-Pacific and European security and prosperity. Partnerships with Australia and the US through AUKUS embodied the ambitions of the *Integrated Review 2021* to strengthen the UK's foreign, defense, and security policy (Prime Minister's Office 2022; UK Parliament 2021a).

The UK's commitments to the Indo-Pacific evolved from *The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Security in an Interdependent World* (2008), which emphasized maritime protection and closer relations with the world's fourth-largest economy, China, to *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review* (2010), which highlighted military projections, cooperation with Gulf states and Russia, and prioritized China diplomatically. This was followed by the *NSS & SDSR 2015*, which underscored the UK's role as a soft power, strengthening partnerships in the Middle East, Asia-Pacific, and ASEAN, and treating China as a strategic partner rather than a threat. Finally, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review* (2021) placed the Indo-Pacific at the forefront of trade and geopolitical priorities, reinforcing cooperation with ASEAN and the CPTPP, while acknowledging China's economic importance alongside concerns about its military modernization and potential regional tensions (Cabinet Office 2008; The Prime Minister and Command of Her Majesty 2010, 2021).

Across the 2008, 2010, 2015, and 2021 policy documents, the UK's foreign policy consistently emphasized regional stability. In the *NSS & SDSR 2015*, the Asia-Pacific was first addressed as an economic interest. However, in the *Integrated Review 2021*, the term was replaced by Indo-Pacific, with a focus not only on economics but also systemic competition, geopolitics, geoeconomics, regional stability, and security. Notably, the term Middle East disappeared from the 2021 document's security context, despite being a major focus in 2015.

This section illustrates how political elites influence the UK's foreign policy. Internal political dynamics, whether differences between parties or leadership changes, function as intervening variables. These variables explain why the stance of the UK on the Indo-Pacific has been fluctuating, even though external pressures remain relatively constant. Within the framework of neoclassical realism, this shift was not only driven by global power distribution but also by domestic needs to reaffirm the Global Britain vision after Brexit.

UK's Foreign Policy Reorientation towards the Indo-Pacific

The UK's economic difficulties following the COVID-19 pandemic also contributed to its foreign policy reorientation towards the Indo-Pacific. The pandemic disrupted supply chains, reduced economic growth, and intensified the post-Brexit need for new investment and trade opportunities (Department for Business and Trade and Department for International Trade 2021). Consequently, the Indo-Pacific was increasingly viewed as a strategic region capable of supporting the UK's post-pandemic economic recovery through trade agreements, investment opportunities, and access to rapidly growing markets.

The reorientation of UK foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific from 2021 to 2023 was the consequence of an interaction between the international system and domestic variables. External pressures included China's military and economic growth, the geopolitical rivalry with the US, and the global economic center of gravity shift towards Asia. These developments compelled the UK to adjust its strategic orientation. However, within the framework of neoclassical realism, foreign policy formulation did not solely emerge from external factors or systemic pressures; rather, it was interpreted through the domestic conditions of the UK.

Domestic factors play an essential role in mediating the UK's response to the Indo-Pacific. Public opinion reflects ambivalence: most of the UK public perceives China as a political and security threat while simultaneously acknowledging its role as an important economic partner. Leadership changes and differences in party orientation have also led to policy fluctuations, with Cameron viewing China as an economic partner, Truss emphasizing its threat, and Sunak adopting an ambivalent position. Brexit itself reinforced the UK's need to seek new markets beyond Europe, positioning the Indo-Pacific as a strategic region for economic expansion as well as a geopolitical arena requiring engagement.

The FTAs signed with Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Singapore, alongside efforts to join the CPTPP, made the UK's economic interests in the Indo-Pacific more apparent. These steps demonstrate that the UK is not only responding to the security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific through the FPDA and AUKUS, but also striving to increase its status as a global economic actor. Thus, UK policy towards the Indo-Pacific is dual in nature: firm in addressing China's security threat, yet pragmatic in pursuing economic cooperation within the region.

While China plays a major role in the UK's Indo-Pacific calculations, ASEAN and India also constitute important components of the UK's regional reorientation. ASEAN is strategically significant because of its centrality in Indo-Pacific regional architecture and its role in global maritime trade routes. The UK's efforts to become an ASEAN dialogue partner and deepen engagement with Southeast Asian countries demonstrate recognition of ASEAN's diplomatic and economic importance (The Prime Minister and Command of Her Majesty 2021).

India likewise plays a crucial role in the UK's Indo-Pacific strategy because of its rapidly growing economy, strategic location in the Indian Ocean, and role within balancing mechanisms against China. The UK increasingly views India as a long-term security and economic partner, particularly in defense cooperation, technology, and trade negotiations (Pant and Milford 2021). However, this article places greater analytical emphasis on China because it functions as the primary systemic driver influencing both regional security dynamics and UK elite perceptions within the neoclassical realist framework.

Overall, this analysis underscores that the UK's foreign policy reorientation towards the Indo-Pacific exemplifies the application of neoclassical realism. External pressures, such as the distribution of power, are interpreted through domestic variables including public opinion, post-Brexit economic imperatives, and elite perceptions. The outcome is a foreign policy that fluctuates but consistently prioritizes the Indo-Pacific, replacing or expanding upon the UK's earlier focus on the Middle East. Within this framework, the UK's foreign policy can be viewed as the outcome of an intricate interplay between internal and external factors rather than just a reaction to the international system.

CONCLUSIONS

This study supports the core assumptions of neoclassical realism by demonstrating that the UK's foreign policy reorientation towards the Indo-Pacific cannot be explained solely by systemic pressures or domestic politics independently. External factors, particularly China's rise, US–China rivalry, and the shift of the global economic center of gravity towards Asia, created structural incentives for policy adjustment. However, these pressures were filtered through domestic intervening variables such as public opinion, economic interests, Brexit-related imperatives, and elite perceptions. Consequently, the UK's Indo-Pacific strategy reflects the interaction between international power distribution and domestic political dynamics, consistent with Rose's neoclassical realist framework.

The authors offer several recommendations in this matter. *First*, the UK needs to boost its economic partnerships with nations in the Indo-Pacific, as this would benefit not only the UK but also the countries in the region by providing them with alternatives amid the US–China geopolitical contention. *Second*, the UK may strengthen its alliances or partnerships to preserve regional stability in the Indo-Pacific, but should not explicitly mention China as the region's source of threat. *Third*, the UK must continue diplomatic dialogue with China to build trust and enhance economic cooperation. In this way, the UK can balance its economic and security objectives in the Indo-Pacific.

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