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## **Britain and ASEAN: Strengthening Ties Post-Brexit**

*By Scott Wightman*

### **Synopsis**

*The UK makes a tangible and significant contribution to the security and prosperity of Southeast Asia, and to strengthening and supporting ASEAN, and the Rules Based International System (RBIS) it seeks to uphold. This contribution will be even stronger after the UK leaves the European Union.*

### **Commentary**

BRITAIN HAS a long history in this part of the world. The United Kingdom came to Southeast Asia, and to Singapore in particular, for reasons of self-interest: to open up new trade routes and protect existing ones. Two centuries later, our understanding of our self-interest is much wider: British interests are best served by an effective rules-based international system.

Within this broader architecture, Britain's interaction with Southeast Asia has been multi-faceted, ranging from security and defence to economic engagement and education. This is a relationship that has not only been mutually beneficial but is also set to grow, after the UK leaves the European Union.

### **Enduring Defence & Security Cooperation**

The UK maintains an enduring defence presence in Asia Pacific. British Forces Brunei provides a permanent UK military presence in Southeast Asia, supporting peace and security and conducting defence engagement with ASEAN member states.

In Southeast Asia, the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) are East Asia's only collective security arrangement. The UK second military personnel to the FPDA's Integrated Area Defence Headquarters in Malaysia, and every year deploys hard

military assets to the region to exercise with Australian, Malaysian, New Zealand and Singaporean Armed Forces.

As part of a commitment to bring military hardware to the region, in 2017 the UK deployed a squadron of Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft into Southeast and Northeast Asia. There will be a similar deployment in 2019, showcasing the UK's multi-role fighter aircraft capability. In 2018, HMS Albion and HMS Sutherland visited Singapore, and HMS Argyll, one of the world's most advanced frigates, will visit the region later in the year.

The UK also helps to build independent defence capability through extensive military training programmes. In the last five years, around one hundred officers from ASEAN Member States have graduated from a UK defence establishment. Current Service Chiefs of Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Brunei all studied in Britain.

### **Strengthening Regional Resilience**

The UK is helping to build resilience against evolving threats including terrorism, cybersecurity and serious organised crime. Indonesian CT officers, using skills learned on UK training, have arrested hundreds of suspected terrorists in recent years.

In Singapore, the British Army is contributing to SGSecure by sharing its experience in deploying in support of police-led CT operations to contain mass casualty incidents. From September, Singaporean Counter Improvised Explosive Device operators will be integrated with the British Army to train Iraqi forces in counter IED techniques.

On cyber too, the UK is an active player, sharing information and know-how, working to tackle threats and create a free, well-regulated international cyberspace, and to protect the integrity of systems used by businesses. In April in London, Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan signed a bilateral agreement in London to collaborate on cybersecurity capacity-building in Commonwealth and ASEAN countries over the next two years.

The UK is also engaged in regional conflict prevention. The UK played a key role in driving peace talks between the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The UK has contributed over £12 million to the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia to address the issue of impunity.

### **Economic Engagement**

Over 4000 British companies have a presence in Singapore, including giants like Rolls Royce, Standard Chartered, HSBC, GSK, Dyson, Shell and BP, employing over 50,000 people and contributing over S\$60 billion of UK investment in Singapore. Increasing numbers of businesses are set up here, bringing cutting-edge technology, innovation and entrepreneurial flair.

The same is true elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Outward UK direct investment in the region is over S\$100bn, making the UK the region's 4th largest foreign investor, investing three times as much as Germany or France. UK goods exports to ASEAN increased by 13% in 2016; total exports were more than double those to India.

The UK has high ambitions for future trade agreements with the region. A first step will be continuity of the EU's free trade agreements (FTAs) with Singapore and Vietnam. The UK is also exploring potential accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

But UK economic engagement with ASEAN and Southeast Asia is about more than sales. For many years the UK has run programmes with local partners to foster economic development and address barriers to sustainable growth. It helped Laos, Burma, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam to define their national pledges before the UNFCCC Conference of Parties in 2015 and 2016.

### **Raising the Bar**

The UK recently launched a multi-million pound programme to support economic reform in Thailand, Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia and Myanmar. The programme will strengthen the business environment; improve government and business transparency and compliance; broaden financial markets; and promote financial inclusion by building capacity and advising on best practice. These interventions could add nearly half a billion US dollars to regional economies over the next decade.

Another multi-million pound programme will accelerate the transition to low carbon energy in Malaysia, Philippines, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia. The programme will improve energy security and access to clean, reliable energy sources and support ASEAN's emissions reduction targets, directly benefiting the most vulnerable populations. Future partnership programmes will focus on smart cities, healthcare, education and trade facilitation.

Science and innovation provides another example of how the UK is active and engaged in this region. Britain has one of the strongest science and research systems in the world and researchers in Singapore are collaborating with scientists in the UK on everything from medical training to photonics.

These collaborations are being extended throughout the region through the Newton Fund and Global Challenges Research Fund, for example on interdisciplinary research to help the sustainable production of resilient rice.

### **Investing in the Future: Education**

Educational links between the UK and Southeast Asia are extensive. Over half of Singapore's Cabinet studied at a top UK university. Each year over 7000 Singaporeans and more than 16,000 Malaysians study in the UK, as did almost the entire Brunei Cabinet, a trend replicated across senior levels of government.

The UK is perfectly placed to help governments in the region respond to the challenge of educating their growing, young populations. Thus British Council consultants have worked with the Lao Government to develop a strategic framework to improve teaching of English, now a mandatory subject for all Lao children from the age of eight, and the

UK sponsored ELT programmes for government officials before Laos' ASEAN chairmanship in 2016.

The consequences of Britain's arrival in Southeast Asia over 200 years ago were decidedly mixed for the region. In the 21st century, across the board, the UK is making a positive difference, helping governments grow their economies and increasing their scope to act independently, in their own national interests. This role will increase in the coming years.

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*Scott Wightman is British High Commissioner to Singapore, former UK Ambassador to the Republic of Korea and Asia Pacific Director at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. This article is based on his address on 17 July 2018 at a reception held in association with RSIS and the Common Purposes' ASEAN Leaders Programme:*  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/uk-is-extensively-involved-in-southeast-asia-speech-by-scott-wightman>

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