



The UK and India in the Indo-Pacific

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Looking beyond the historical links between the UK and India, there are opportunities and reasons for the two to work together in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Indo-Pacific has become a global fulcrum, not only for global trade and economic activity but also for maritime security. The tasks of ensuring open sea lanes of communication, countering terrorism and piracy in the region, and promoting sustainable and inclusive development have emerged as priorities, at the same time as China poses a challenge to the rules-based international order. This has made it critical for those who value the existing system to coordinate strategies and activities in a way that can provide a robust response to China's growing influence while also preserving the region's stability.

For the UK and India, this provides an opportunity to expand cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, both in maritime security as well as in infrastructure development and connectivity. UK Secretary of State for Defence Gavin Williamson recently laid out [his vision](#) for defence under the moniker of a [Global Britain](#), which included the announcement that one of two [new littoral strike groups](#) would be deployed in the Indo-Pacific and that the first operational mission of HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, the Royal Navy's new aircraft carrier, will cover the Mediterranean, Middle East and Pacific.

While questions have been raised about the budgetary and manpower capacity to carry out some of the declared plans, the defence secretary's initiative indicated the UK's appetite to play a greater role amid the shifting geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. Similarly, the Indian Ocean region and Indo-Pacific have grown to become fixtures in India's defence and foreign policy thinking. While India's threat perception may still be focused largely on its land borders with China and Pakistan, the Indian Ocean region has increasingly become the arena in which India can take decisive steps to strengthen partnerships and expand its economic and security role in the region, particularly in light of China's growing influence in its neighbourhood.

The [joint statement](#) released following Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's meeting with UK Prime Minister Theresa May in April 2018 asserted both leaders' commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific and, in language that seemed to be addressed towards China, highlighted the importance of freedom of navigation as well as 'international obligations, standards, best practice' in connectivity initiatives. More fundamentally, the April 2017 [joint statement](#) on the UK–India defence partnership noted the need to enhance bilateral information exchange to improve maritime domain awareness. These statements indicate the significance the Indo-Pacific holds in both countries' strategic thinking and provide a framework within which the UK and India can work together.

The western Indian Ocean region could be a useful starting point, as it is not afflicted by geopolitical tensions to the same extent as areas in Southeast Asia, and already includes Indian initiatives that the UK can plug into, such as the [Asia–Africa Growth Corridor](#) proposed by India and Japan. Given that this is at a very early stage, it remains to be seen what concrete projects are implemented and where the UK can contribute; however, this represents an opportunity for the UK and India to demonstrate their ability to provide alternatives to China's large-scale infrastructure offering, and ones which, unlike many Chinese efforts, seek to adhere to international standards and best practices.

In addition, the UK has an established security presence in the Gulf through the Naval Support Facility in Bahrain and Joint Logistics Support Base in Duqm, Oman, as well as participation in joint forces like the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) and [Operation Atalanta](#), which have featured the Indian Navy as a partner. While the multilateral engagement will continue, it also points to the need for deeper bilateral engagement between the UK and India on maritime security, particularly in light of the UK's impending departure from the European Union. For instance, while Operation Atalanta is currently headquartered in Northwood in the UK, it will be [moved](#) to Spain after Brexit. At the same time, the Maritime Security Centre – Horn of Africa, which shares information with India's newly established [Information Fusion Centre](#) for the Indian Ocean region (IFC-IOR), will be moved to Brest in France. It might thus be useful for the UK to post a liaison officer at the IFC-IOR, like the US, France, Japan and Singapore have expressed an interest in doing, in order to foster information and expertise sharing in a visible and direct manner.

Cooperation in the western Indian Ocean can also be taken up under the remit of the Commonwealth. While much of the discussion around the UK's relationship with the Commonwealth has focused on post-Brexit trade and economic potential, it should be noted that the Commonwealth is not a trade bloc, and there is no reason to suggest that Brexit will lead to a dramatic increase in trade among Commonwealth countries. Rather, the organisation can capitalise on India's desire to play a larger role in multilateral fora by strengthening its focus on issues of mutual concern, such as sustainable development, cybercrime and connectivity. These issues are also likely to be priorities for the numerous [member countries](#) of the Commonwealth in the region, many of whom have also received attention from China as part of its Belt and Road Initiative.

In spite of common interests in safeguarding the rules-based order and maritime security, the bilateral relationship between the UK and India continues to be afflicted by longstanding challenges, such as the perception in India that the two countries diverge on [regional security](#) questions in South Asia as well as the deadlock over visa and travel facilities accorded by the UK government for Indian nationals. Another test of the relationship will be

the aftermath of the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion on the [Chagos Islands](#), where India supported the claim of Mauritius.

Nevertheless, in the Indo-Pacific, the UK and India share a common perception of the long-term challenges and are often found on the same side of the debate. If the two powers can avoid becoming bogged down in discussions on intractable issues and focus on areas of common interest, they may be able to not only help balance China's influence in the region but also facilitate capacity building and knowledge sharing geared towards greater maritime security and sustainable development.

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