Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Global Politics and Socio-Humanities
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.32291

Explaining the UK's Differentiated Approaches Toward Japan and China (2019–2024): English School Perspective

Kaipeng Shang

International Relation, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK
ntvq0245@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract. The double standards of the UK in the Indo-Pacific between how it deals with China and Japan are symptomatic of how each country is situated within "international society." This article examines the UK's bilateral policies from 2019 to 2024 through the lens of the English School. The article contends that the UK policy towards China is influenced by pluralist anxieties about the 'us' and 'them'; where issues of boundary maintenance and national security are at play, whereas the UK's policy towards Japan is premised upon solidarist principles of cooperation and partnership and with an emphasis upon projecting UK grand strategy. The article identifies a strategic divergence in the UK's behavior, in particular through its tilt towards the Indo-Pacific, as being representative of different attitudes towards China and Japan as constituted in international society. By tracing the connection between discourse and policy outputs, this article develops a theoretically precise, empirically verifiable framework for the analysis of UK-China and UK-Japan relations and, more generally, demonstrates how the UK's construction of states impacts on its foreign policy.

Keywords: UK, Policy, International, China, Japan

1. Introduction

Over the past five years, the UK has adopted a more cautious and risk-based approach to China and has deepened strategic relations with Japan. This reflects a UK divergence in Indo-pacific 'tilt,' in official rhetoric about a rules-based order, and in national security and national resilience. Yet many narratives either separate UK-China tensions from UK-Japan cooperation or explain the tilt as simply geopolitics. Before unpacking the recent divergence, it is worth specifying the baseline conditions that render UK–Japan alignment relatively 'straightforward' to tell and institutionalize. The UK and Japan have long shared an identity as advanced industrial democracies and have participated in elite governance consultations such as the G7, which tends to generate a common diplomatic lexicon rooted in rules, legality and institutional order. This "club" proximity doesn't dictate policy outcomes, but it does reduce the political and normative transaction costs of treating Japan as a like-minded member of an ideal international society. In terms of the English school, such common institutional membership and status recognition could assist insider framing by making specific assertions about partnership and joint accountability more legitimate and credible claims. But baseline affinity on its own cannot explain the intensification and timing of policy divergence

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.32291

after 2019; it simply outlines the background conditions in which a stronger tilt towards Japan becomes more justifiable—and thus would appear to be exacerbating, rather than reducing, the puzzlement as to why UK policy concurrently shifted towards further cooperation with Japan as it became more risk-accepting China.

India is also an important player in the UK's emerging Indo-Pacific strategy alongside China and Japan. In recent years the UK has been increasingly active in courting India as a strategic partner, alongside its collaboration with Japan and its warier approach to China. India's status in the Indo-Pacific as an ascendent power and a champion of the rules-based international order gives the UK possibilities for further defense collaboration, and multilateral engagement in for example the G20 and Quad. But New Delhi's fraught relations with Beijing and strategic autonomy means the UK has to engage in a complex balancing act of cooperation and cautious risk management. The UK's construction of India and its place within the region, therefore, vacillates between solidarist partner and pluralist risky sign, which is emblematic of the UK's regional stability approach in the Indo-Pacific. Essay assertion: this study examines a paradox within Anglo-Japanese relations: Why did the UK engage in a differential treatment of China and Japan at the same time? Q: How has the UK's bilateral approach to China and Japan (2019–2024) and its "international society" framing of these two countries been articulated? This paper seeks to identify how the UK's bilateral engagement with China and Japan (2019–2024) and 'international society' framing of these two states have been manifested. The objective of this study is to equip the reader with a deep understanding of what informs UK foreign policy in relation to these two pivotal Indo-Pacific states. In doing so, this paper attempts to shed light on the strategic logic of these differentiated approaches, enabling a better understanding of the UK's role in contributing to regional stability through pragmatically meaningful partnerships in the Indo-Pacific by focusing on the discursive repertoire that underpins UK strategies. The analysis is intended to provide pointers as to how the UK's nascent regional strategy can more effectively advance cooperation, security and resilience, especially in terms of the complicated demand to simultaneously pursue engagement with and the management of risk in an evolving geopolitical environment.

2. Literature review

2.1. English school foundations

International politics unfolds, the English school (ES) argues, in anarchic systems as well as in international societies, the latter of which states, as the central actors, are constituent members that share common institutions, norms, and rules that constitute and sustain order. Bull underscores the extent to which order is made possible by such factors as international law, diplomacy, sovereignty, and the management of great powers [1]. Dunne's overview of ES stresses that it is a tradition which seeks to bridge the gap between institutional and historical analysis on the one hand and normative commitments [2]. In order to illustrate how international society shapes expectations regarding propriety, Buzan elaborates the concept of "primary institutions." [3]. In recent work on the English School, fundamental debates about the nature of international society and its constitutive institutions persist. In this section on the English School, commentators highlight continuing theoretical debates that deepen our understanding of how shared norms, sovereignty, and institutional expectation's structure world order, thus connecting classical foundations to contemporary problems of the international [4].

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.32291

2.2. Pluralism and solidarism

Whether international relations ought to be more solidarist or pluralist is the subject of a great ES controversy. Basing this on its assessment of itself and world society, the talk is highly and explicitly about transformation. The contest for language inflects a vocabulary for foreign policy analysis to understand how states produce "insider" and "outsider" through public language: pluralist-inflected discourses articulate boundaries and risk management; solidarist-inflected discourses articulate like-minded partnership.

2.3. UK strategy and the Indo-Pacific tilt

Because they define the meaning of terms such as "partner," "challenge," and "rules-based order" through priority setting and institutionalization, UK grand strategy articulations are significant. It was formalized as the Indo-Pacific tilt by the Integrated Review (HM Government) [5]. The China framing was sharpened by the Integrated Review Refresh (HM Government) [5], which advocated increased protection and alignment with friends and partners and described China as a "systemic" and "epoch-defining" challenge. Informed by assessment work, it is likely that London will see its influence in the Indo-Pacific as deriving from partnerships and selective deployments, not large-scale permanent presence (IISS) [6].

2.4. UK–Japan and UK–China literatures, and the gap

Shetler-Jones explains that Japan is at the center of the tilt in UK-Japan relations, illustrating that the UK has a preference for like-minded partners in maintaining a rules-based order [7]. Domestic politics matter significantly in UK-China relations: The political terrain of China policy is cleaved by public opinion on China along Brexit lines [7]. However, the straights relating to UK–China relations also suggest the entire bilateral relationship has changed in the last ten years. Ying applies process tracing to demonstrate that Britain's China policy shifted from economic engagement to national security prioritization, catalyzed by a series of events that included the Huawei ban and the National Security Law for Hong Kong, and influenced by domestic politics and external actors particularly the US–China competition. This literature illustrates that although strategic tensions with China are increasing, the UK government is still struggling to reconcile its economic ties with security imperatives, with very mixed and in some cases outright incoherent policies emerging towards Beijing [8]. These information shows that these books are often analyzed singly.

3. Theoretical framework and variables

In this article, two variables are operationalized. IV International-society framing the concept international-society framing refers to the official UK discourse on how the status of a country can be graduated or located within its 'preferred' international society. This language is evident in grand strategy white papers and the speeches of prime ministers (HM Government) [9]. (DV) The policy mixes policy mixes – refer to the stream of policy instruments that the UK government applies to a target country through a sequence beginning with cooperation-building, moving to risk-management, and finally, protection-type output delivery.

Underlying these variables is a mechanism that states, who are considered as attaining trusted member of the international society, UK policy that is based on the solidarist tradition tends to emphasize partnerships that underpin rule-based relations and stability. In contrast, when a state is reimagined as a systemic challenge, the UK's policy turns more pluralist, centering on boundary-

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.32291

setting as means through which the domestic order is preserved and selective engagement established with the state.

Two propositions and hypotheses are drawn from this theoretical model:

Proposition 1: Insider framing results in a cooperation-heavy policy mix.

Hypothesis 2 Systemic-challenge framing results in a policy mix emphasize protection and risk management.

In order to measure these variables, indicators are specified. For an independent variable (IV) of international-society framing, two operational indicators are examined in UK strategy texts whether the target country is framed as a "like-minded partner" and/or as a "systemic challenge." The policy prediction is that the insider frame should promote cooperation, whereas the challenger frame places the emphasis on boundary-setting.

Concerning the DV of policy mix, such operational indicators as defense agreements, deployments, and resilience will be assessed. These signs will likely vary from country to country. For instance, the UK-Japan relationship should demonstrate a cooperative focus, whereas the UK-China relationship may be more inclined towards boundary-setting and risk management and protective elements.

As well as Japan and China, the UK's engagement with India mirrors a 'strategic hedging' approach of pragmatism and cautious risk management, particularly as it situates itself in the Indo-Pacific. As Shetler-Jones has set out, India is an increasingly important partner for the UK, with expanded defense cooperation and engagement in multilateral forums such as the G20 and Quad [7]. Like Japan, India is also regarded by the UK as a fellow supporter of the rules-based order, and thus a 'natural' partner in the quest for regional stability (HM Government) [9]. The UK response to India is, however, shaped also by the special relationship with China, with undercurrents of risk-management filter through the UK's tentative engagement in the security arena (IISS) [6]. This is consistent with the UK's international-society framing, which at the core illustrates both solidarist and pluralist logics depending on the geopolitical context.

4. Case Analysis

This part provides two short cases to show how ES links discourse to policy. They focus on exemplary signals between 2019 and 2024.

4.1. UK–Japan: insider partnership and cooperation deepening

The UK is also consistently portrayed in the discourses as looking to Japan among others as a crucial partner for regional stability and now also for upholding a 'rules based' international system. Consistent with insider framing, the UK has pursued highly cooperative instruments with Japan. A notable example is the UK–Japan reciprocal access agreement (RAA), which was signed in January 2023 and provides the basis for the deployment of forces and more complex joint exercises and cooperation (UK Parliament). In the tilt literature, Japan is "pivotal partner" through which the UK operationalizes the tilt and signals commitment Indo-pacific order (Shetler-Jones) [7]. This is in line with Proposition 1: insider framing promotes cooperation deepening.

4.2. UK–China: systemic challenge and boundary-setting

In contrast, UK grand strategy is increasingly defining China as an 'epoch-defining' and 'systemic' challenge to the international order (HM Government) [9]. The Refresh focuses on greater national

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.32291

security protections and more alignment with allies and partners. This framing informs a policy mix that stresses risk management and protectionist actions in sensitive areas, at the same time as the UK seeks to keep some space for selective engagement. Domestic politics can reinforce this trend: public opinion on China is split by Brexit identities, with incentives for tougher and more security-oriented narratives be rising [10]. In sum, the China case confirms Proposition 2: systemic-challenge framing links with boundary-setting and protection.

4.3. UK–India: a hybrid approach of cooperation and strategic balancing

India holds a special place in the UK's Indo-Pacific strategy which contains aspects of both alignment and balancing elements. As Shetler-Jones [7] observes, India is constructed as a partner dedicated to the maintenance of the international rules-based order, along the lines of Japan. Increased UK engagement with India through defense agreements and joint exercises has illustrated a cooperation-heavy policy mix (HM Government) [5]. But the UK's policy is not unreserved, given India's strategic rivalry with China, it pursued a more pluralist concept in security issues, one that balanced cooperation with prudent risk management (IISS) [6]. This blended strategy towards India resonates with the theoretical underpinning of international-society framing where the UK tailors its policy mix based on both the type of relationship it has and the regional context.

5. Analysis and discussion

5.1. The logic of system adaptation: reducing the cost of cooperation by rule docking

In sum, these two cases indicate that the UK's Japan and China policies could be understood as complementary constructs of an ordering strategy. Japan is constructed as an insider partner that upholds the institutions of international society, while China is constructed as a systemic challenge whose 'boundaries' must be policed to shield order and national security. ES helps explain why UK policy so consistently speaks in institutional terms whilst being responsive to strategic imperatives. Capability-oriented analysis point to the UK relying on alliances and the ad hoc deployment of force (IISS), this sheds light on the ascension of Japan as a valued partner [6]. It is important to note that the framework remains reserved, does not say rhetoric ends up determining policy, but says that international-society framing is a significant source of differentiation and that can be observed both in discourse and in policy instruments.

The UK's approach to India highlights the complexities of regional diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific. While Japan is portrayed as an insider partner and China as a systemic challenge, India's status is more ambiguous, straddling the boundaries of both engagement and risk management. As the IISS has been observed, the UK has opted for a hybrid approach in response to India's increasing strategic significance and its precarious position between the West and China [6]. It includes closer defense and security relations with India, but also wariness about the strategic rivalry between India and China. The way in which the UK frames India within the international society perspective, therefore, reveals an understanding of India that lies at a point along the continuum between wanting to be in some way aligned with India whilst also being cognizant of the 'troubled' geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.

6. Conclusion

In sum, the UK's differentiated foreign policies toward Japan, China, and India reveal the powerful conditioning effect of international-society framing on its diplomatic and strategic calculations.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.32291

Applying the English School, the article argues that the UK constructs each of these states differentially as insiders or systemic challengers in its policy constellation.

The application of insider ship to Japan has resulted in a cooperation-heavy policy mix based on shared democratic values and a commitment to a rules-based international order. Like India is portrayed as a strategic partner, but the UK's is more palpable around India navigating geopolitics and tensions with China. Solidarism with an element of risk management A UK policy that has to treads a line between the ideal of closer defense/security cooperation with India and doing so cautiously.

On the other hand, China is presented as the greatest systemic challenge and the resultant UK approach is pluralist, predicated upon boundary management and defensive discourses. This move reflects the UK's anxieties over China's expanding influence and the challenge it posed to stability in the region. Thus, the UK's attitude towards China is one of risk and hence also seeking to moderate the impact of China while finding ways of selective engagement where mutual interests are present.

The analysis of this paper, with reference to literature, highlights the significance of international-society framing as a key determinant of the policy choices of the UK in the Indo-Pacific. The framework shows how the UK modifies its diplomatic tools according to the anticipated significance of states in the international order. Looking ahead, future research could build upon this framework by exploring other states in the Indo-Pacific region for a better understanding of the impact of international-society framing on foreign policy at the global level.

References

[1] Bull, H. (1977) The anarchical society: A study of order in world politics (2nd ed.). London: Red Globe Press.
[2] Dunne, T. (1998) Inventing international society: A history of the English School. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
[3] Buzan, B. (2004) From international to world society? English School theory and the social structure of globalization. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[4] Basu-Mellish, J., Navari, C., Zhang, Y., Hussein Banai, Filippo Costa Buranelli, Zaccato, C., Taeuber, S.F., Charlotta Friedner Parrat and Bottelier, T. 2023. English School Special Section. Millennium. 51(2), pp.552–614.
[5] HM Government (2021) Global Britain in a competitive age: The integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy (CP 403). London: HM Government.
[6] International Institute for Strategic Studies (2022) The UK Indo-Pacific tilt: Defence and military implications (Research paper). London: International Institute for Strategic Studies.
[7] Shetler-Jones, P. (2023) UK–Japan relations and the Indo-Pacific tilt: The cornerstone. The RUSI Journal, 167, 44-52.
[8] Ying, Y. (2025). Process-Tracing the Shift in UK's China Policy Post-2020. International Journal of Asian Social Science Research. 2(6), pp.46–57.
[9] HM Government (2023) Integrated review refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world. London: HM Government.
[10] Chow, W.M., Han, E. and Li, X. (2019) Brexit identities and British public opinion on China. International Affairs, 95, 1369-1387.