

Research Briefing
13 January 2023
Number 9704

By Louisa Brooke-Holland

UK-Japan defence agreement 2023

The Government signed what it described as the “most important defence treaty between the UK and Japan since 1902” on 11 January 2023.¹ The treaty is expected to be laid before Parliament shortly.

The agreement reflects the Government’s wider “tilt to the Indo-Pacific”, set out in the 2021 [Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#).

This paper discusses what we know so far about the defence agreement and recent developments in the UK-Japan defence relationship.

1

An increasingly close relationship

In recent years, the UK and Japan have developed an increasingly close defence and security relationship.

A 2012 Prime Ministerial joint statement declared “Japan and the UK are each other’s most important partners in Asia and Europe, respectively.”² A subsequent Defence Cooperation Agreement was signed in June 2012.³

¹ Prime Minister’s Office, [Prime Minister hosts Japanese PM and agrees historic defence agreement](#), 11 January 2023

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, [Joint Statement by the Prime Ministers of the UK and Japan: A Leading Strategic Partnership for Global Prosperity and Security](#), 10 April 2012

³ [HC Deb 24 January 2013 c418W](#)

“Japan is one of our closest strategic partners.”

Integrated Review
March 2021

In 2016 four RAF Typhoon aircraft participated in exercises in Japan.⁴ The following year, a Defence Logistics Treaty was signed to “make it easier for our armed forces to work together on a range of activities, including UN peacekeeping operations and joint humanitarian aid and disaster relief missions”.⁵

In August 2017 the two Prime Ministers signed a [joint declaration on security cooperation](#), which included references to joint exercises and defence equipment and technology cooperation.⁶

In February 2021 a joint statement from the UK and Japan foreign and defence ministers described each other as their “closest security partners in Europe and Asia respectively.”⁷

The UK Government’s March 2021 [Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), described a UK “tilt to the Indo-Pacific” region. The review said that as part of this strategy the UK would deepen its partnership with Japan:

The region is already critical to our economy and security; is a focal point for the negotiation of international laws, rules and norms; and will become more important to UK prosperity over the next decade. Japan is one of our closest strategic partners, including on security, and we are committed to deepening this partnership.⁸

The accompanying [Defence in a Competitive Age](#) command paper described how the UK’s defence relationship with Japan has “deepened significantly in recent years with exercises, training exchanges, security arrangements and capability development programmes” adding there was more to come:

The next decade will see further development with our closest security partner in Asia. We will deepen cooperation between the Japanese Self Defence Forces and the British armed forces towards a free and open Indo-Pacific.⁹

⁴ The Guardian, [UK sends Typhoons to Japan for joint drills to strengthen security ties](#), 14 October 2016

⁵ FCO, [UK and Japan strengthen defence ties](#), 26 January 2017

⁶ Gov.uk, [Japan-UK joint declaration on security cooperation](#) (PDF), 31 August 2017; Dr Yee-Kuang Heng, Professor of International Security at the University of Tokyo, discusses the importance of military exercises in [UK-Japan military exercises and mutual strategic reassurance](#), Defence Studies, vol 21, 2021, issue 3

⁷ Ministry of Defence & FCDO, [Japan-UK foreign and defence ministerial meeting 2021: joint statement](#), 3 February 2021

⁸ Cabinet Office, [Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy](#), 16 March 2021

⁹ Ministry of Defence, [Defence in a Competitive Age](#), CP 411, 22 March 2021

A refresh of the Integrated Review is currently underway and is expected to be published in late February or early March 2023.¹⁰

From Japan's perspective, strengthening relations with like-minded allies was a key part of its new [National Security Strategy](#), published in December 2022.¹¹ The strategy describes Japan's security environment as "severe and complex as it has ever been since the end of World War II."¹² The accompanying National Defence Strategy mentions the UK, alongside France, Germany and Italy, as partners with whom Japan will work for training and exercises, defence equipment and technology cooperation, and mutual despatch of vessels and aircraft.¹³

A study by RUSI, the defence think tank, in 2015 described the two countries as "natural partners." The study, in conjunction with the National Institute for Defence Studies in Tokyo, explored the then current defence and security relationship and potential areas of cooperation, including in the combat air and maritime domains.¹⁴

The Defence Committee launched an inquiry into [UK defence and the Indo-Pacific](#) in February 2022.

Closer maritime ties

The Royal Navy and Japan Maritime Self-Defense Forces have been deepening their relationship in recent years.

In 2021 the HMS Queen Elizabeth carrier strike group visited Japan as part of her first deployment.¹⁵ Both Navies have signed a Maritime Security Arrangement, with the two countries sharing maritime domain awareness.¹⁶

Two of the Royal Navy's new [offshore patrol vessels](#), HMS Tamar and Spey, are now forward based in the Indo-Pacific. The vessels sailed in late 2021 and are not expected to return to the UK for the next five years; crews fly from the UK on rotation and the ships can undergo maintenance in the region.¹⁷ Both ships were in Japan in December 2022 and participated in joint exercises and events.¹⁸

¹⁰ Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, [Correspondence from the National Security Adviser relating to the Integrated Review Update](#) (PDF), 9 December 2022

¹¹ Japan strengthens defence ties with UK and US, Janes Defence Weekly, 12 January 2023

¹⁵ Royal Navy, [Pacific training for Carrier Strike Group as Japan visit comes to an end](#), 10 September 2021. The strike group visited Sasebo, Yokosuka and Funakoshi, and participated in exercise Pacific Crown and a maritime partnership exercise. [PQ 91830 \[Indo-Pacific region: Warships\]](#), 16 December 2021

¹⁶ Ministry of Defence & FCO, [UK commits to deeper defence and security cooperation with Japan](#), 3 February 2021

2

The 2023 defence agreement

On 11 January 2023 the Prime Ministers of the UK and Japan signed a Reciprocal Access Agreement in London. The UK Government said it will:

- Allow the UK and Japan to deploy forces in one another's countries
- Rapidly accelerate defence and security cooperation
- Cement the UK's commitment to Indo-Pacific security
- Allow both forces to plan and deliver larger scale, more complex military exercises and deployments.¹⁹

The UK Government said the agreement was the result of years of negotiation.²⁰ In September 2021, the Government announced that the two countries would commence formal negotiations on a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) to deepen the defence relationship between the two countries:

The aim is to create the conditions for a deeper, more regular and complex defence engagement programme, setting out the terms and conditions for UK and Japanese personnel undertaking activity in one another's countries which makes bi-lateral activities like training and joint exercises easier and quicker to facilitate – consequently feeding into a more regular programme of events.²¹

¹⁴ RUSI, [Partners for global security](#) (PDF), Whitehall Report 3-15, 2015

¹⁵ Royal Navy, [Pacific training for Carrier Strike Group as Japan visit comes to an end](#), 10 September 2021. The strike group visited Sasebo, Yokosuka and Funakoshi, and participated in exercise Pacific Crown and a maritime partnership exercise. [PQ 91830 \[Indo-Pacific region: Warships\]](#), 16 December 2021

¹⁶ Ministry of Defence & FCO, [UK commits to deeper defence and security cooperation with Japan](#), 3 February 2021

¹⁷ Royal Navy, [Patrol ships bid farewell to Portsmouth as they begin Indo-Pacific deployment](#), 7 September 2021

¹⁸ [Tamar completes her time in Japan to begin next leg of her Indo-Pacific adventure](#), Royal Navy, 7 December 2022; Commons Library CBP-9089, [The Royal Navy's Offshore Patrol Vessels](#), 17 December 2020

¹⁹ Prime Minister's Office, [Prime Minister hosts Japanese PM and agrees historic defence agreement](#), 11 January 2023

²⁰ Prime Minister's Office, [Prime Minister hosts Japanese PM and agrees historic defence agreement](#), 11 January 2023

²¹ Ministry of Defence, [UK and Japan begin talks on deeper Defence relationship](#), 28 September 2021

The Japan Times said the agreement reflects Tokyo's push for closer security ties with a variety of partner countries amid growing US-Chinese tensions and Japan's concerns over Taiwan's future.²²

The treaty is expected to be laid before Parliament shortly.²³

Service personnel and the death penalty in Japan

The Times newspaper reported that a major sticking point for the UK during the negotiations was Japan's retention of the death penalty and the risk it could apply to UK service personnel if they committed certain crimes. The Times says a compromise was reached, by which the agreement allows for visiting troops who commit offences while on duty to be dealt with according to the legal system of their own country.²⁴ However, UK military personnel who are off duty and commit offences will be subject to the Japanese justice system. The Times notes that the death penalty applies to those convicted of "aggravated murder", which the paper explains usually means mass killings and the murders of children.²⁵

The Times also reports that the Ministry of Defence believes that "diplomatic pressure" could be applied to avoid the imposition of the death penalty in the event a capital crime was committed by a British service member. It also says the agreement contains a clause that allows visiting commanders to decline to co-operate with the Japanese authorities if a service member faces the risk of execution.²⁶

The first European country to have such an agreement with Japan

The UK will be the first European country to have a Reciprocal Access Agreement with Japan, and only the third country to do so.

Japan signed a similar deal with Australia in January 2022.²⁷ Writing for the Australian Institute of International Affairs, Thomas Wilkins said the agreement, discussions on which began in 2014, comes at a time when both countries "view the deteriorating security environment in the Indo-Pacific

²² Japan Times, [UK-Japan defence cooperation to intensify following landmark agreement](#), 11 January 2023

²³ For information on Parliament's role in scrutinising treaties, see Commons Library CBP 9247, [How Parliament treats Treaties](#), 1 June 2021

²⁴ A Status of Forces Agreement will, amongst other things, cover jurisdiction over visiting personnel.

²⁵ The Times, [British troops guilty of crimes in Japan could be hanged](#), 12 January 2023

²⁶ The Times, [British troops guilty of crimes in Japan could be hanged](#), 12 January 2023

²⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, [Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement](#), 6 January 2022

with ever-growing trepidation.” He also notes that Australian concerns about capital punishment in Japan was part of the negotiations.²⁸

In October 2022, the two countries published a Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation which included pledges to enhance interoperability between the two militaries through exercises and operations, mutual use of facilities and personnel links and exchanges.²⁹

US personnel have been based in Japan since the end of World War 2 and have a long-standing Status of Forces Agreement.³⁰

3 Collaboration on next generation combat aircraft

The UK Government’s 2018 Combat Air Strategy set out its ambition to develop a new combat aircraft to replace Typhoon in the 2030s. The strategy clearly stated the Government’s intent to work with international partners to help offset the cost of developing a sixth-generation aircraft and associated systems.³¹

Japan and Italy expressed an early interest in the programme, with both seeking next generation aircraft in similar timeframes to the UK.³² The 2021 Defence in a Competitive Age command paper mentioned both countries in the section on Tempest.³³

In December 2021 the UK and Japan agreed to develop a joint jet engine demonstrator, and signed a Memorandum of Cooperation to pursue joint technologies.³⁴

²⁸ T Wilkins, [Another piece in the jigsaw: Australia and Japan sign long-awaited Reciprocal Access Agreement](#), Australian Institute for International Affairs, 20 January 2022

²⁹ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, [Australia-Japan Joint Declaration](#), 22 October 2022

³⁰ A short overview of US Japan relations can be found in Congressional Research Service, [US-Japan relations](#) (PDF), IF10199, 21 July 2022

³¹ Commons Library CBP-8391, [The Combat Air Strategy: From Typhoon to ‘Tempest’?](#), 31 August 2018

³² Japan indicated interest in Tempest in 2018 – Japan indicates possible Tempest collaboration with UK, Janes Defence Weekly, 26 July 2018; Italy joined the UK Tempest project in 2019 – DSEI 2019: Italy joins Tempest, Janes Defence Weekly, 11 September 2019

³³ Ministry of Defence, [Defence in a Competitive Age](#), CP 411, 22 March 2021

³⁴ Ministry of Defence, [UK and Japan to develop future fighter jet engine demonstrator](#), 22 December 2021

In July 2022 the Ministry of Defence confirmed it had launched a concept analysis of the programme with Italy and Japan.³⁵

Announcement on the Global Combat Air Programme

On 9 December 2022 the Prime Ministers of the UK, Japan and Italy confirmed plans to together develop the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP).³⁶

The programme will replace Typhoon aircraft, in service in the UK and Italy, and Japan's MHI F-2 multirole fighter aircraft, in the mid-2030s. Japan had already been working on a replacement for the F-2 under its F-X programme.

The joint statement said the programme will “deepen our defence co-operation, science and technology collaboration, integrated supply chains, and further strengthen our defence industrial base.” The statement went on to say the programme will “support the sovereign capability of all three countries to design, deliver and upgrade cutting-edge combat air capabilities, well into the future.”³⁷

In a written statement, the Defence Secretary explained the UK and Italy will merge its current Future Combat Air System (FCAS) programme with Japan's FX programme to form the Global Combat Air Programme “under a spirit of equal partnership.”³⁸

The Tempest programme is led by BAE Systems, alongside Leonardo (for Italy), Rolls Royce and MBDA. In Japan the F-X fighter aircraft programme is led by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries.

Takahashi Kosuke, Tokyo correspondent for Janes Defence Weekly, described the move as a “historic collaboration for Japan”, observing the rarity of Japan forming a partnership with any other nation except the US for such a major national defence project. Japan had been discussing options for future combat aircraft with Lockheed Martin of the US, but Kosuke said Japan's timeframes align better with Italy and the UK as all three are looking for new aircraft in the mid-2030s. He also suggests all three countries are looking to export the aircraft, with Japan able to offer inroads to Asian markets, with the UK and Italy offering access to the European market.³⁹

³⁵ Farnborough 2022: UK launches Tempest flight demonstrator effort, Janes Defence Weekly, 18 July 2022

³⁶ Prime Minister's Office, [Joint Statement from Prime Ministers of UK, Italy and Japan](#), 9 December 2022

³⁷ Prime Minister's Office, [Joint Statement from Prime Ministers of UK, Italy and Japan](#), 9 December 2022

³⁸ [HCWS428 \[Defence update\]](#), 9 December 2022

³⁹ T Kosuke, [Why Japan chose Britain and Italy for its F-X fighter programme](#), The Diplomat, 9 December 2022

France, Germany and Spain are separately jointly developing a next generation fighter aircraft along similar timeframes.

Professor Alessio Patalano of King's College London told the Defence Committee in June 2022 that the UK-Japan defence relationship was also important from Japan's perspective because Tokyo is increasingly interested at an industrial level "in developing future capabilities in co-operation with non-US partners."⁴⁰

The Defence Committee [opened an inquiry into aviation procurement](#) in March 2022.

⁴⁰ Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: UK defence and the Indo-Pacific](#), HC 183 2022-23, 7 June 2022, q42

Disclaimer

The Commons Library does not intend the information in our research publications and briefings to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. We have published it to support the work of MPs. You should not rely upon it as legal or professional advice, or as a substitute for it. We do not accept any liability whatsoever for any errors, omissions or misstatements contained herein. You should consult a suitably qualified professional if you require specific advice or information. Read our briefing '[Legal help: where to go and how to pay](#)' for further information about sources of legal advice and help. This information is provided subject to the conditions of the Open Parliament Licence.

Sources and subscriptions for MPs and staff

We try to use sources in our research that everyone can access, but sometimes only information that exists behind a paywall or via a subscription is available. We provide access to many online subscriptions to MPs and parliamentary staff, please contact hocllibraryonline@parliament.uk or visit commonslibrary.parliament.uk/resources for more information.

Feedback

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Please note that authors are not always able to engage in discussions with members of the public who express opinions about the content of our research, although we will carefully consider and correct any factual errors.

You can read our feedback and complaints policy and our editorial policy at commonslibrary.parliament.uk. If you have general questions about the work of the House of Commons email hcenquiries@parliament.uk.

The House of Commons Library is a research and information service based in the UK Parliament. Our impartial analysis, statistical research and resources help MPs and their staff scrutinise legislation, develop policy, and support constituents.

Our published material is available to everyone on commonslibrary.parliament.uk.

Get our latest research delivered straight to your inbox. Subscribe at commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe or scan the code below:



 commonslibrary.parliament.uk

 [@commonslibrary](https://twitter.com/commonslibrary)