

Original Paper

An Exploration of the AUKUS Trilateral Partnership

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Abstract

On September 15, 2021, the US, UK, and Australia launched the Trilateral Security Partnership (AUKUS) in reaction to China's increasing influence in the Indo-Pacific area. In reaction to China's growth, this "small multilateral framework" based on "shared values" seeks to bolster US hegemony in the area by boosting military capability projection in the Indo-Pacific region. It is an example of the international nuclear non-proliferation system returning, which weakens it, causes disagreements among ASEAN nations, and upsets the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific area, all of which have a detrimental effect on the regional security situation. However, there are some fragile ties between the US and its allies, and the US-created AUKUS alliance's prospects are dim given the lengthy and unpredictable time it takes for nuclear submarine cooperation to take hold.

Keywords

AUKUS, Indo-Pacific Strategy, China, Nuclear Submarines

1. Introduction

On 15 September 2021, US President Joe Biden, British Prime Minister Johnson and Australian Prime Minister Morrison announced in Washington a trilateral security partnership known as AUKUS, in which the three countries will share research and development information and technical expertise in key technology areas such as artificial intelligence, cyber technology, quantum computing, underwater systems and long-range strike capabilities (The White House, 2021, September 15). Widespread worldwide attention has been drawn, among other things, to the US and UK's pledge to assist Australia in developing nuclear-powered submarines. The latter went so far as to cancel the sizable conventionally powered submarine project it had previously agreed to with France. Although the mechanism is officially referred to as a partnership, it is really more of a traditional military alliance with security and defense cooperation as its main priorities. The US, UK, and Australia are also all natural allies. It has also been referred to as "an alliance in some sense, but not in the traditional sense" by certain Chinese academics (Chen, X. C. & Chen, H., 2022). Since then, the three nations have formally signed the "AUKUS"

cooperation agreement. This includes the signing of the Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Exchange Agreement, the convocation of the Joint Steering Group on Advanced Capabilities and the Joint Steering Group on the Australian Nuclear Powered Submarine Program, and the first gathering of the Trilateral Joint Steering Group in December 2021, which will officially launch the alliance (The White House, 2021, December 17). Even though this remark doesn't specifically identify China, it is frequently used to express issues that are exclusive to China. It is well recognized that as the balance of power moves from the West to the East, the Indo-Pacific area is at the center of rising geopolitical conflict. Due to China's growing military might, the developing situation in the Indo-Pacific area has come to the attention of all the major world powers. A multilateral security architecture has the support of the United States in order to counter China's rising ability.

2. The Interests of Australia, the US and the UK in Building the AUKUS Mechanism

The establishment of AUKUS is an important step for the US and its allies to vigorously promote the "Indo-Pacific strategy" to marginalise China, and is also a continuation of its hard-line policy towards China in recent years. Since Obama proposed his "Asia-Pacific rebalancing" strategy, the US has stepped up its efforts to build its "small circle" to contain China's development. The UK and Australia's participation in AUKUS is both a result of the US strategic push and the pursuit of their own strategic interests. The AUKUS agreement reflects the different political aspirations of the three countries based on their own interests, and their perception that their economic and security interests in the Indo-Pacific region will be squeezed by an increasingly powerful China.

2.1 The Essence of AUKUS Stems from the United States' Concern about China's Rising Relative Power

In recent years, the United States has viewed China as a major threat to its quest for Indo-Pacific hegemony and thus US dominance. China is viewed as "the only competitor capable of posing a lasting challenge to a stable and open international system" in the Biden Administration's Interim National Security Strategy Guidance, released in March 2021 (The White House, 2021, March 10). In the context of the US-China game, the Indo-Pacific region is a strategic platform for the two countries to play in the political, economic, military and diplomatic spheres. Against the historical backdrop of the diminishing power of China and the US, the US fears that it will be difficult to maintain its strategic priority in the Indo-Pacific region and thus safeguard its global interests. In addition, the threat of North Korea's nuclear missiles to its ally South Korea has prevented the US from easily undertaking a strategic contraction in the region. For the US, AUKUS is a major attempt to reshape its own national capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, and a response to China's growing naval power in the South China Sea in the context of great power competition. As such, as a major foreign policy move immediately following the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan, AUKUS was taken as evidence of the Biden administration's foreign seriousness, competence and assertiveness.

Specifically in the maritime domain, China's military modernisation and growing naval power has increased US concerns about its own influence in the Indo-Pacific region, in December 2020, the US

stated in its new tri-service maritime strategy report, *Maritime Dominance: The Way to Win with Integrated Territorial Naval Power*, that “China is the most pressing and long-term strategic threat” (US Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard, *Advantage at Sea: Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power*, 2020 December, Foreword). The South China Sea is critical for the United States to meet its security commitments to the West, to maintain and strengthen the US-led security architecture in the Western Pacific, and to prevent China from becoming the East Asian hegemon. As a result, the US believes that maintaining its own and its allies’ maritime capabilities and larger armed forces in the region is critical to enhancing the US’s leverage over China in the Indo-Pacific region, including the South China Sea. A well-equipped Australia could increase the United States Navy’s leverage in the Indo-Pacific region, including the South China Sea.

2.2 The US Seeks to Maintain Indo-Pacific Hegemony through a “Small Group” of Military Forces

Unlike the unilateralist policy of the Trump era, which was centred on “America First”, Biden has accelerated the pace of building a united front with China since coming to power, hoping to return to the traditional model of “US leadership + allies to follow”. Smaller multilateral groups with greater consensus have proven to be more capable and adaptable in addressing challenges and organizing collective action (Jada Fraser, n.d.). AKUSE is a significant step forward in the Biden administration’s efforts to create a more compact alliance. The US-Japan-India-Australia Quadruple Alliance (QUAD) and the earlier Five Eyes Alliance (Five Eyes) already exist in the Indo-Pacific region, but the former is a more comprehensive strategic coordination mechanism for major powers, whereas the latter focuses primarily on intelligence information sharing. In the case of the US-Japan-UK-Australia Quadruple Alliance, India’s non-aligned status, combined with Russia’s strategic restraint on it, makes it difficult for the four countries to build on their existing military cooperation, and any talk of a “Asian mini-NATO” is impossible.

2.3 The Strategic Needs of the UK and Australia Offer the Possibility of Establishing AUKUS

The policy needs of the UK and Australia reflect their intentions to lean towards the Indo-Pacific region. The UK plus such as AUKUS is the result of both practical interests and values. The AUKUS tri-national military partnership is also an important attempt to reinvigorate the UK’s international influence and justify its departure from the EU, as the UK is eager to rediscover its place on the international stage after Brexit. In 2016, Prime Minister Johnson proposed a post-Brexit “Global Britain” strategy. At the Conservative Party’s annual conference, Johnson said, “Something bold and brilliant won’t happen if we stay in the EU, I give you AUKUS” (Sir Stephen Lovegrove speech at the Council on Geostrategy). In March 2022, the “Indo-Pacific tilt”, which was advanced before the Johnson administration’s foreign policy paper, is gradually establishing more and more intersections with the overall diplomatic strategy of a “globalised Britain”.

Moreover, Britain’s engagement is intended to be reflected in the defence of “the shared values of partnership” with its “closest allies”. Historically, the UK has followed the US in its foreign policy, while Western countries continue to justify their foreign policy on the basis of so-called Western values,

arguing that China's rapid rise and increased influence has posed a serious challenge to their 'values that won the Cold War', [Strategic Challenges for the UK - The Foreign Policy Centre (fpc) The Foreign Policy Centre (fpc.org.uk)] is for the UK to address these challenges with its "like-minded" allies, especially as Afghanistan has partially affected the group's credibility.

Australia has previously withdrawn from QUAD and Kevin Michael Rudd believes that closeness with Japan and India could jeopardise its relationship with China (Australia's New Government: Climate, China and AUKUS). Australia, on the other hand, hopes to enhance its security by joining AUKUS. It is well known that Australia has adopted a high-intensity strategy of following the US Indo-Pacific strategy and policy towards China, rather than its previous balanced policy. Bilateral relations between Australia and China have been on a steady upward trend since the new century, with a significant strengthening of economic and trade relations in particular, but since 2016, Australia has taken the initiative to deteriorate Sino-Australian relations, resulting in a continuous deterioration of bilateral relations. The study suggests that the main reason for the shift in Australia's attitude towards China is that Australia attaches great importance to the stability of the international order in an international system of increased uncertainty and sees China as a major country that could impact the stability of the existing international order (Zhou, 2020).

3. Strategic Implications of the US-UK-Australia AUKUS Mechanism

The creation of the AKUSE alliance, a major step by the Biden administration to strengthen global alliances, has created regional blocs and geopolitical instability. The US has claimed that AUKUS will establish prosperity and stability in the Indo-Pacific region and has repeatedly emphasised the need for a "level playing field" in the region, claiming that other countries are subject to "economic coercion" by China and legitimising their group's struggle and interference with regional stability. All of this, however, goes against Biden's claim that he is willing to cooperate with "any government that seeks peaceful solutions to common difficulties". President Biden's speech to the 76th UN General Assembly is not only a return to Cold War thinking, but it also highlights the US and UK's "double standards" on nuclear non-proliferation, which represent a threat to the Indo-Pacific region's continued peaceful growth.

3.1 AUKUS Accelerates the Bloc Struggle and the Return of Cold War Thinking

AUKUS is essentially an alliance between the United States, Britain and Australia to collectively contain China and Russia based on a subjective conception; it is an alliance between the United States of America and the United States of America in a comprehensive context of intensifying competition among major powers, increasingly intense geopolitical games, the defeat and disgrace of Afghanistan, and the long-running out-of-control epidemic of the new crown at home, with the "Anglo-Saxon democratic state" as its ideological orientation. The "Anglo-Saxon democratic state" is the ideological orientation of a small circle of individual "like-minded" countries. The AUKUS alliance is part of the US strategy to return to the Indo-Pacific region, as exemplified by Biden's slogan "America is back",

which also This means that the US has shifted its focus further from Afghanistan and West and Central Asia to the Indo-Pacific region, with a focus on China. Before this, the Biden administration was quick to repair alliances, coopting a number of countries to “join in” and actively involving the UK, France and Germany in expanding their Indo-Pacific presence. The US has encouraged the US, Japan, India, Australia and France to hold several bilateral and multilateral joint military exercises in the Indo-Pacific region this year, and even conduct so-called freedom of navigation patrols in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. The increased deterrence and checks and balances generated by AKUSE have deepened the mistrust between countries in the Indo-Pacific region, which is not conducive to peace and cooperation in the region.

3.2 AUKUS Undermines the International Nuclear Non-proliferation System

The US, UK and Australia use the AUKUS mechanism to use nuclear technology exports as a tool for geopolitical gaming, undermining the seriousness of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. Even in the most extreme case, Australia does not participate in the design and construction of nuclear-powered submarines, nor does it produce nuclear materials independently, but it still needs a large number of trained professionals to operate and monitor nuclear reactors, and the provision of appropriate technical training for these personnel will also pose a risk of technology proliferation. The risk of nuclear proliferation would be further increased if Australia were to be involved in various ways in the design and construction of nuclear submarines and the production of nuclear material. Indeed, Australia’s introduction of nuclear submarines takes full advantage of loopholes in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which does not prohibit States parties from researching, producing and using nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, but requires that peaceful nuclear activities be conducted in accordance with and in compliance with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) statute and safeguards regime, in order to prevent diversion of nuclear energy from peaceful uses to nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices. Currently, the AUKUS Alliance claims that its members are not in violation of the (NPT) because it only involves the manufacture of attack-class nuclear-powered submarines and not nuclear weapons (John, n.d.). More seriously, the pragmatism and double standards adopted by the US in helping Australia build nuclear submarines means that its consideration of geo-security interests overrides concerns about nuclear proliferation, dealing a heavy blow to the world’s collective confidence in nuclear non-proliferation and sowing greater security risks. Reactions from all sides show that AUKUS has already had an impact on countries including Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Israel, Iran and others. During a recent visit to Washington, the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Rafael Grossi, said that other countries might follow Australia’s lead and seek to build nuclear-powered submarines, raising serious proliferation and legal issues (IAEA worried about Australia, UK and US alliance triggering nuclear proliferation). The UK’s outgoing Chief of Defence Staff has said that the AUKUS agreement could be extended to include other allies such as Japan. There is no doubt that AUKUS has shaken the security framework in Asia.

3.3 AUKUS Contests ASEAN's "Centrality"

Diplomats in the area have grown to believe that ASEAN will speak for the region when outside countries intercede due to its centrality. ASEAN has given institutional design a lot of consideration throughout its internal expansion to ensure centrality. The creation of the little international organizations AUKUS and QUAD, however, emphasizes ASEAN's failure from a distance. AUKUS is a symbol of the advancements non-ASEAN nations are making in the critical field of maritime security, which will surely alter the regional power structure. AUKUS has received varied reviews from ASEAN member states, and ASEAN has not yet established a cohesive position on the issue. Overall, the Philippines has been encouraging. For instance, Delfin Lorenzana, who served as the country's defense secretary at the time, said that Australia has just as much right as the Philippines to strengthen its submarine defense capabilities (Ruth Abbey Gita-Carlos, n.d.). Indonesia and Malaysia are wary of the South East Asia region becoming a frontier in the great power game and the introduction of nuclear submarines in Australia. Indonesia has been wary of Australia due to the many geostrategic and historical conflicts between the two countries, and the occasional friction in recent years. In response, Indonesia's Foreign Ministry issued a statement expressing concern over the "ongoing arms race and power projection in the region", stressing that Australia should continue to comply with its nuclear non-proliferation obligations and maintain its commitment to regional peace, stability and security under the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. Malaysian Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah, for his part, said Malaysia's position on maintaining peace and security in the "Indo-Pacific" region, including issues related to nuclear disarmament, nuclear non-proliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear technology, was firm. Singapore expressed its hope that the agreement would "contribute constructively to peace and stability in the region and be complementary to the regional architecture (Matthew Mohan, n.d.).

The AUKUS deal, which serves as a visual representation of the Biden administration's stepped-up rivalry with China, is further pressuring ASEAN to "choose sides." Due to the increasing relationship between China and the US and the ASEAN nations, as well as the security conundrum caused by AUKUS and the interregional weapons competition, ASEAN may become more polarized. The issues facing ASEAN will worsen in the future as a result of the creation of AUKUS and the geostrategic reality it represents. If ASEAN is unable to offer practical responses to the profound changes in the regional situation, the emergence of these non-ASEAN-led institutions could risk marginalizing the ASEAN-centered regional multilateral architecture.

3.4 Causing a Shift in the Indo-Pacific Region's Power Dynamics and a New Round of Arms Race There

As a country straddling the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Australia's construction of a nuclear submarine is a complete breach of the commitment it made when it signed the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, and a serious breach in the efforts of ASEAN countries to build a nuclear-free zone and a "zone of peace" in the Indian Ocean. In April this year, AUKUS issued a joint statement that the three sides

would deepen their cooperation in the development of hypersonic weapons and in electronic warfare (The White House, 2022). These have further increased inter-regional tensions. Under the harsh reality, the countries in the Indo-Pacific region will be in a situation where everyone will be in danger, thus competing to accelerate the upgrading of their military power, which may trigger a new round of arms race, undermine the precious peace situation in the region, and cast a shadow on the security, stability and development of the countries in the region. The ASEAN nations will be in a perilous position to hasten their military build-up as a means of striking a balance of threat in light of the creation of the AUKUS alliance and Australia's nuclear-powered submarine fleet. The Indo-Pacific area is currently experiencing a disturbing lack of peace, security, and stability as a result of the participating nations' active purchases of modern weaponry, regular military drills, and armament expansion. Because of the escalating crisis in the South China Sea since 2010, ASEAN nations have sped up their naval modernization through buying. In light of this, the creation of the "Oculus" has fueled the present arms race in the Asia-Pacific area, requiring governments to spend more money at a time when their economies are already failing due to the epidemic.

4. Challenges for AUKUS

Since its inception, AUKUS has achieved some results with a focus on military cooperation projects and has become somewhat "solid" in character. However, AUKUS has faced many challenges and constraints in the process of its promotion, and it remains to be seen whether it can achieve the original intentions of its founders.

4.1 Alliance Transformation Leads to Risk of Fragmentation of the US Alliance System

The US alliance system in the Indo-Pacific region is undergoing a transformation, with Washington increasingly seeking more active strategic partners based on Anglo-Saxon members when developing plans and partnerships. This change is reflected in the shift from the Five Eyes alliance to the Four Nations mechanism to the AUKUS mechanism. This reorientation of US alliance strategy has had a profound impact on its traditional alliance relationships, and an important aspect of its role has been to generate controversy among allies, particularly those who are not included in the traditional alliance. Other US allies do not share the same view of AUKUS as a cooperative mechanism, although this does not change their overall position of following the US. AUKUS thus puts the US alliance system at risk of internal tearing.

On 16 September 2021, the EU's Indo-Pacific Cooperation Strategy came out almost simultaneously, demonstrating the EU's ambition to strengthen its influence in the Indo-Pacific region as an independent whole. AUKUS allows the EU to rethink its strategic autonomy in the wake of the changes in Afghanistan and to justify its own independent presence in the Indo-Pacific. The AUKUS agreement has thwarted a multi-billion dollar agreement signed between France and Australia, and France is not happy with Australia's breach of the agreement and with the US and UK's decision. The AUKUS deal, which cost France billions of dollars in submarine contracts, was denounced by France as a "stab in the

back” and French Foreign Minister Le Drian accused the US, UK and Australia of “duplicity, a serious breach of trust and contempt”. France also subsequently recalled its ambassador to the US and Australia for consultations, for the first time in the history of US-French relations. [Although France has now reached an understanding with these countries, it is difficult to restore the level of trust that existed before. The absence of Canada and New Zealand, both members of the Five Eyes Alliance, from AUKUS has led to internal controversy over their international status. Canadian military analysts, for example, say that the country was not included mainly because it had no contribution to the nuclear submarine programme (Jay Heisler, n.d.). And New Zealand was excluded from AUKUS more because of its modest contribution to an alliance that seems focused on containing Chinese diplomatic and territorial expansion. Following Australia’s announcement of plans to build a nuclear submarine, Ardern said “the position on banning nuclear-powered ships from New Zealand waters will not change”.

Japan is the most important US ally in the Asia-Pacific region and has had deep defence ties with the US for many years, but it has mixed feelings about the birth of AUKUS. On the one hand, AUKUS serves Japan’s interests in maintaining naval power containment against China; on the other hand, it means that it may ultimately diminish Japan’s strategic and operational role in the region. Intelligence cooperation between the US and Japan has developed over the years, particularly on China and other related issues in the Indo-Pacific region, but overall trust in the intelligence field remains inadequate. AUKUS once again makes this reality visible. It also means that the US has a fuller degree of trust in its “Anglo-Saxon” allies who are fighting alongside it. Similar concerns exist in India, a “prospective ally” of the US. On the one hand, these offers of cooperation in nuclear propulsion technology have been made to the United States at a high level, but have been rejected by the American side. On the other hand, India is concerned that AUKUS will not only overshadow the role of the Quad and India. The deal is highly likely to trigger a crowding of nuclear attack submarines (SSN/submarine nuclear submarines) in the East Indian Ocean, and Canberra’s nuclear submarine capability is also likely to surpass India’s in the coming years, naturally undermining New Delhi’s conventional underwater capabilities and regional hegemony (Abhijit Singh, n.d.).

4.2 The Prospect of the US Using AUKUS to Shape an “Asia-Pacific Version of NATO” is not Promising

The conclusion of the AUKUS agreement is reminiscent of the way the US has used NATO as a tool to expel Russia from Europe since the 1990s. AUKUS hopes to apply the previous “NATO experience” to the Asia-Pacific region, but the use of military force to force a regional and global security structure that is dominated by itself and dependent on others has been repeatedly proven by the US over the past 30 years. However, the forcible shaping of a regional and even global security structure based on military power has been repeatedly proven by the dismal practice of the United States over the past 30 years to bring only tragedy and disaster. [The establishment of the Asia-Pacific version of NATO as a complement to the US multilateral anti-China mechanism is not in the interests of local countries. The

US has continuously politicised economic issues and used economic means to coerce Asia-Pacific countries, especially ASEAN countries, to choose sides between China and the US. But for many countries in Southeast Asia, the US “sugar-coated bombs” do not make it “easy” to comply. Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen’s adviser, Ko Kim Wah, recently said in a media interview that Cambodia would not “choose sides” between Washington and Beijing, even though U.S. investment in the country is growing. The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) currently being mooted by the US is an effort to promote economic and technological “decoupling” from China in the Asia-Pacific, and Asia-Pacific countries are taking further steps to reduce their dependence on other countries or markets in order to hedge against the risk of possible great power competition in the region. In order to avoid the risk of competition from major powers in the region, Asia-Pacific countries will also take further steps to reduce their over-dependence on other countries or markets and to strengthen the resilience of their supply chains through localization (China Institute of International Studies, 2022). The United States’ arbitrary breaking of the regional strategic balance, cobbling together anti-China circles and constantly testing red lines will not be met with a single call; if it takes the “Asia-Pacific version of NATO” to isolate China, the ultimate isolation will be the US itself.

4.3 US-UK-Australia Nuclear Submarine Cooperation full of Uncertainties

At present, US-UK-Australia nuclear submarine cooperation is still fraught with uncertainty. It is generally believed that Australia will not receive its proposed first nuclear-powered submarine until at least 2030 (10 years ahead of schedule! Australian media reveals Australian plot to speed up acquisition of US nuclear submarines). The details of the US-UK-Australia nuclear submarine deal are still subject to negotiation, including but not limited to the use of HEU or LEU for the nuclear power reactor, where the submarine will be built, what the timeline for construction will be, how the International Atomic Energy Agency will be involved in safeguards, etc. and so on. In addition, the length of time it would take to build a nuclear submarine could make the actual cost significantly higher than predicted. Analysts have warned that the Australian government faces the prospect of an explosion in defence spending because the cost of a nuclear-powered submarine would be “significantly higher” than the cancelled \$90 billion French project (Defence faces budget blowout with Aukus nuclear submarines to cost more than scrapped French project). As a highly publicised trilateral cooperation, there are also partisan political considerations among the three countries, and the long-term nature of the nuclear submarine project means that the cooperation requires consistent bipartisan policy implementation, requirements that could be compromised in a partisan tussle. In the 2022 Australian federal election, Labor then accused Prime Minister Morrison of putting politics ahead of national security in the AUKUS agreement, citing a five-month gap between the Biden government’s request to notify Australia of the timing of AUKUS and the eventual conduct of the notification, “as if Mr Morrison thought it was just another political card.” (Alexandra Humphries, 2022). The US side has been affected by this year’s US mid-term elections, so the establishment of

AUKUS the required congressional approval legislation is likely to wait until 2023 (The Rand Blog, 2022). The success of AUKUS will require the development of a new US legislative framework, the investment of organisational resources, the delegation of responsibility for managing the development of AUKUS bureaucratic moderation, etc. All of these may entail certain risks.

5. Conclusion

The Asia-Pacific region is the most dynamic and promising region in the world, and has become the main engine of world economic growth. The U.S., Britain and Australia, with their “shared values” as their link, are adhering to narrow geopolitical concepts and trying to provoke a “new cold war”, which has undoubtedly caused damage to the Asia-Pacific regional order and dealt a heavy blow to the world’s collective confidence in nuclear non-proliferation. In the face of the US’s aggressive deterrence, China needs to adopt a calm analysis, grasp the main aspects of the contradiction, and seek to turn challenges into opportunities and pressure into momentum to resolutely safeguard national security and secure the external environment for development.

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