



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

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The AUKUS Alliance: Return to the Past?

Author

Lalit Kapur

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Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

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Author

Commodore Lalit Kapur (Retd.), Senior Fellow for Maritime Strategy, Delhi Policy Group

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The Launch of AUKUS by President Joe Biden, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Prime Minister Boris Johnson, September 15, 2021. Source: Facebook (@WhiteHouse)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, President Joe Biden, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga at the Quad Summit in the White House, Washington DC, September 24, 2021. Source: PMO

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by
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Contents

Introduction	1
AUKUS Objectives and Content	2
The SSN and its Benefits	4
Will the SSN Enable Deterrence for Australia?.....	5
Geostrategic Impact of AUKUS	8
Geopolitics of Non-Proliferation	11
Conclusion	12

The AUKUS Alliance: Return to the Past?

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Introduction

Shortly after taking over as Australia's Prime Minister, Scott Morrison was asked how he would handle the delicate balance between the US and China. He replied, "Our relationships with each of these major partners are different and they're both successful. Australia doesn't have to choose and we won't choose"¹.

On his first visit to the US State Department as the 46th US President, Joe Biden spoke of "restoring American engagement internationally" and earning "back our leadership position, to catalyse global action on shared challenges"². The "America is back" theme continued with his convening of the first Quad Leaders' Virtual Summit on March 12, to advance his vision of cooperation on global challenges. It inspired his Interim National Security Strategic Guidance³. It also provided the backdrop to his first international visits to the UK, Belgium and Switzerland, during which he signed the New Atlantic Charter⁴, renewed the US-UK partnership to tackle global challenges together, revived the US-EU partnership after Donald Trump's "America First" era, reaffirmed his commitment to NATO after his predecessor's threat to withdraw from the alliance, and engaged with Russian President Putin.

The AUKUS alliance brings into focus the hiatus between the words and deeds of both leaders. Australian PM Morrison has evidently made a choice, effectively signalling that its American and British allies will always come first. Biden's actions have raised questions about whether the US policy going ahead is truly based on leading a coalition of allies and partners, or is just another version of 'America First'. It has accentuated divisions between the US and the EU, while resulting in a severe setback to relations with France. France has in fact recalled its Ambassadors to both the US and Australia for consultations, a decision "justified by the exceptional gravity of the announcements made on

¹ Doorstop Singapore, 15 Nov 2018, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/doorstop-singapore>

² Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World, US Department of State Headquarters, February 04, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>

³ Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>

⁴ The New Atlantic Charter, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/10/the-new-atlantic-charter/>

15th September by Australia and the United States”⁵. It has further described the AUKUS announcement as “constituting unacceptable behaviour between allies and partners, whose consequences directly affect the vision we have of our alliances, of our partnerships and of the importance of the Indo-Pacific for Europe”.⁶

This brief analyses the strategic implications of AUKUS for India and the Indo-Pacific.

AUKUS Objectives and Content

The stated objective of AUKUS, in the words of Prime Minister Morrison, is to help deliver the security and stability the Indo-Pacific needs⁷. President Biden expands on the objective when he says, “Our nations will update and enhance our shared ability to take on the threats of the 21st century ... we need to be able to address both the current strategic environment in the region and how it may evolve, because the future of each of our nations – and indeed the world – depends on a free and open Indo-Pacific enduring and flourishing in the decades ahead”⁸. The incongruity of an erstwhile colonial power and its settler colonies in distant parts of the globe unilaterally determining, without consultation with regional nations, what Asia needs or how to fulfil this need escape both. But the three Anglo-sphere allies also signal a core interest, in a manner not very different from China stating its core interests.

The underlying intent is to strengthen the ability of each of the three partner countries to safeguard its security and defence interests, while promoting “deeper information and technology sharing” and fostering “deeper integration of security and defence-related science, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains”⁹. In simple terms, this means that Australia has made its choice

⁵ Statement by Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs (17 September 2021), <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/australia/news/article/statement-by-jean-yves-le-drian-minister-for-europe-and-foreign-affairs-17-sept>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/09/15/remarks-by-president-biden-prime-minister-morrison-of-australia-and-prime-minister-johnson-of-the-united-kingdom-announcing-the-creation-of-aukus/>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS, September 15, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus/>

and joined the UK in adopting a unipolar US-centric vision for the Indo-Pacific, in preference to the multipolar vision of other Asian partners.



The Launch of AUKUS by President Joe Biden, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Prime Minister Boris Johnson, September 15, 2021. Source: Facebook (@WhiteHouse)

As the first initiative under AUKUS, the US and UK have committed to supporting Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines for the Australian Navy. A trilateral effort of 18 months duration is to be launched to seek the optimal path to deliver this capability and bring it into service “at the earliest achievable date”¹⁰. The initial efforts of the trilateral partnership will also focus on “cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and additional undersea capabilities”¹¹.

Other Australian moves to safeguard its security, as per PM Morrison, include the acquisition of Tomahawk Land Attack Cruise Missiles for its Hobart-class destroyers; acquisition of Joint Air-Surface Standoff Missiles (Extended Range), Long Range Anti-Ship Missiles and continuing collaboration with the US to develop hypersonic missiles to equip RAAF aircraft; acquisition of 400 Km range precision strike guided missiles for the Australian Army; and accelerating a \$ 1 billion sovereign guided weapons manufacturing enterprise to enable production of such weapons on Australian soil¹².

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Australia to Pursue Nuclear-Powered Submarines Through New Trilateral Enhanced Security Partnership. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/australia-pursue-nuclear-powered-submarines-through-new-trilateral-enhanced-security>

The SSN and its Benefits

The "Submarine, Attack, Nuclear" (SSN, as per the NATO Glossary of Abbreviations)¹³, has remained the preserve of just a few countries. The technology was pioneered by the US with the commissioning of USS Nautilus in 1954. The USSR followed with the November class in 1959. Other operators in sequence were the UK with HMS Dreadnought in 1963, France with FS Redoubtable in 1971, China with its Han class in 1974, and India with the leased INS Chakra in 1988. India's first submarine with an indigenously designed nuclear propulsion package, INS Arihant, was commissioned in 2016. Brazil will probably become the seventh operator when Alvaro Alberto, an SSN based on the French Scorpene-class but with an indigenous multipurpose nuclear reactor, is commissioned in the early 2030s. Australia will thus become the eighth SSN operator, if the path to deliver nuclear propulsion capability is found.



USS Nautilus moving out of harbour
Source: US Naval History and Heritage Command

¹³ NATO Glossary of Abbreviations used in NATO Documents and Publications, AAP-15(2013), https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/Other_Pubs/aap15.pdf

The complexity of the path has been commented upon by this author in earlier writings¹⁴. It is not yet clear whether a reactor currently in service (the USN uses the S9G reactor for its SSNs, while UK uses the PWR 3) will be transferred to Australia. More probable is that a reactor will be designed afresh, enabling the building of a submarine to Australian specifications, upgrading of its technological expertise and involvement of its domestic industry. Further complexity is added by the fact that Australia lacks even civil nuclear experience; all it operates is a small thermal reactor for production of medical isotopes. Delivery of the first SSN in the late 2030s appears optimistic; a more likely time-frame is the mid-2040s. Australia's Collins class submarines are to be upgraded, giving them a life of around 10-15 more years after the upgrade and bridging the gap till the new submarines enter service. It should also be expected that Australia will lease an SSN from the US at some stage, to obtain operational experience and familiarise naval crews with nuclear reactor operation.

The advantages of SSNs over SSKs have also been covered by this author in an earlier brief¹⁵. The obvious Australian gain is the acquisition of nuclear-propulsion technology, thrusting its navy into the global front ranks. But there are associated costs. Financially, SSNs take far more resources to build, operate and maintain. One Australian commentator has estimated that it will necessitate increasing defence spending from around 2% to 3% or 4% of GDP¹⁶. Diplomatically, Australia will have a much harder time convincing Asian neighbours that it is an independent and reliable regional partner, and not a US proxy. Geopolitically, the decision locks Australia to the US, removing the freedom of choice its Prime Minister spoke of three years ago.

Will the SSN Enable Deterrence for Australia?

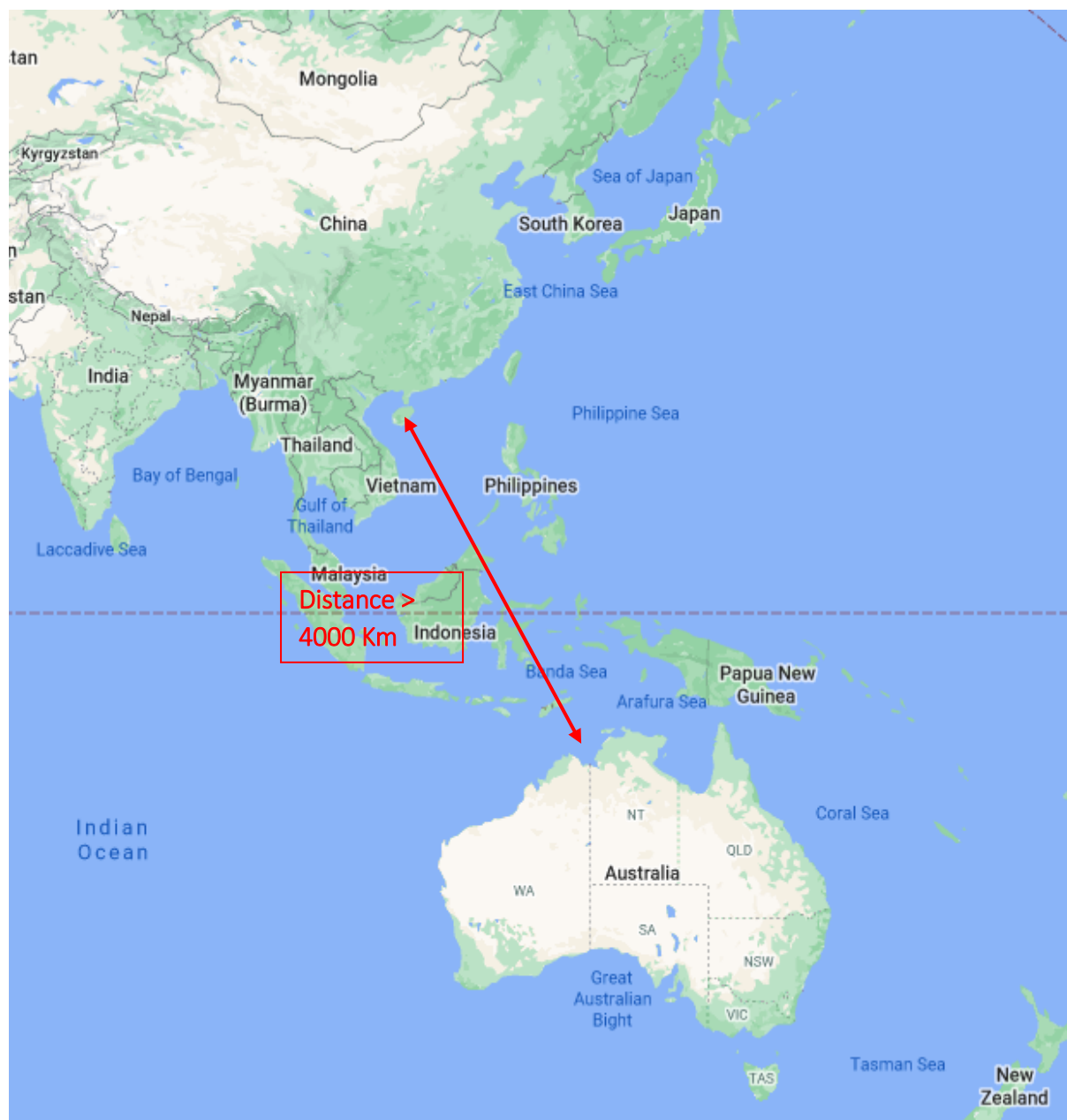
At the outset, it must be clarified that the deterrence being discussed is conventional, not nuclear. The conventional deterrent utility of Australia's

¹⁴ Cmde Lalit Kapur, "India's Nuclear Shark", in "India's Silent Hunters", <https://www.amazon.in/Indias-Hunters-Brought-Geopolitics-magazine/dp/B078JR31YH>

¹⁵ Cmde. Lalit Kapur, "Whither India's Submarines", May 27, 2021, <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/whither-indias-submarines.html>

¹⁶ Peter Jennings, "AUKUS sets a better direction for Australia's defence", September 17, 2020, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/aukus-sets-a-better-direction-for-australias-defence/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Weekly%20The%20Strategist&utm_content=Weekly%20The%20Strategist+CID_f7fff5b14ce28f0d4185e11427064555&utm_source=CampaignMonitor&utm_term=AUKUS%20sets%20a%20better%20direction%20for%20Australias%20defence

SSNs will be determined by their contribution to the defence of Australia; or for its offensive purposes in the Indo-Pacific.



Australia's Geography Vis-à-vis China. Source: Google Maps

Consider the first. It is conceivable that at some future date, China will make a military foray into the Southern Pacific with objectives similar to those of Japan in the 1940s, or to 'teach Australia a lesson', as it tried with Vietnam in 1979. This would require deployment of a surface force to breach Australia's security perimeter, necessitating a military response. However, Australia's geography provides it with inherent advantages. Over 4000 Km of water and the archipelagic barriers of Indonesia and the Philippines separate it from China. The few straits through these archipelagos become choke points that can effectively be exploited by deployment of even conventional submarines.

Circumventing these choke points by the PLAN making the approach via the Luzon Straits and the Philippine Sea is possible, but the Coral Sea islands again create choke points that can be exploited. In today's age, it is difficult to conceive of a large surface force remaining undetected over such large distances. Thus, there should be sufficient time to permit positioning of even conventional SSKs across the predicted path. These considerations had figured when Australia decided to renounce nuclear propulsion when building the Collins class. The incremental value provided by an SSN for Australia's defence is thus debatable.

That leaves offensive, forward defence related tasks, including alongside the US Navy and towards the developing Australia – Japan security relationship, or in South East Asia. China's Anti-Access/Area Denial Capability makes SSNs probably the only units that could safely be deployed off East Asia, to respond for example with a Taiwan contingency, or threats to Japan. Australian SSNs will possess the range to contribute to this, unlike conventional submarines which do not. However, if the much larger number of US SSNs fail to deter China here, it is hardly likely that the addition of an Australian submarine or two will make a difference. Moreover, unless Admiral Davidson's testimony to Congress in March 2021 is completely off the mark¹⁷, the Taiwan contingency could occur within the current decade, long before Australian SSNs become available. If anything, clearing of the path to acquire them may accelerate China's timeline for forcible resolution of the Taiwan issue.

In other Western Pacific regions, China has successfully adopted a grey zone strategy to achieve its objectives. This relies on its Coast Guard or maritime militia to achieve geopolitical objectives, while keeping naval force over the horizon. The fundamental requirement to deter grey zone coercion is visible presence. This necessitates the usage of surface ships; SSNs serve no purpose. Unless China changes its (successful) strategic approach, the Australian SSNs are going to be of little use in deterring China's grey zone coercion.

The deterrence that Australia seeks to acquire thus bears little relationship with defence of Australian territory, or the strategy adopted by China to impose its will in East or South East Asia. Its value lies in strategic signalling – that Australia is preparing to beef up the capability to defend its interests in the years ahead, has shed its position of not making a choice, and is prepared to support deterrent US objectives in East Asia. In real terms, Australia has made a prediction that China will use force to seriously impact Australian strategic

¹⁷ Mikio Sugeno and Tsuyoshi Nagasawa, "Xi's Potential 2027 Transition Poses Threat to Taiwan: Davidson September 18, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Interview/Xi-s-potential-2027-transition-poses-threat-to-Taiwan-Davidson>

interests two decades or more from now and is preparing to deter or fight a prolonged and widespread war (effectively World War III), preferably with US support. The wisdom of this decision will no doubt be debated in Australia.

Geostrategic Impact of AUKUS

The response from China's wolf-warrior spokesperson Zhao Lijian has been on predictable lines¹⁸. It harps on the AUKUS alliance irresponsibly undermining regional peace and stability and international non-proliferation efforts, intensifying the arms race. It then goes on to the standard lines about regional mechanisms conforming to the "trend of peace and development of the time", the need to contribute to enhancing mutual trust, not target any third party and to abandon outdated Cold War zero-sum mentality and narrow-minded geopolitical perception. But China will be paranoid and wrongly portray any perceived opposition, including to its illusory objective of "building a community with a shared future for mankind"¹⁹, while ignoring the Indo-Pacific visions of other Asian nations and protesting that its own objectives are peaceful. China's unrelenting coercive activity against India, Japan, South Korea, Southeast Asian countries and Australia continues to undermine regional peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. Its nuclear proliferation record on Pakistan and North Korea is by now too well-known to bear repetition, as is the unprecedented transformation of its military capability and warship building spree. China's protestations are thus credible only for its domestic constituency. They draw little or no resonance in the international environment.

As highlighted above, the military-focused AUKUS is unlikely to deter China's approach, which relies on its economic prowess and creeping control over multilateral organisations coupled with grey zone coercion, with a latent military capability backed by its Anti-Access / Area Denial Strategy. China has already responded by seeking to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans' Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)²⁰. (In a counter-move, so has

¹⁸ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on September 16, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1907498.shtml

¹⁹ Commentary: Why President Xi strongly advocates building community with shared future", September 22, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/22/c_139388123.htm

²⁰ "China Applies to Join Pacific Trade Pact to Boost Economic Clout", September 17, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-officially-applies-join-cptpp-trade-pact-2021-09-16/>

Taiwan²¹). The US, in contrast, appears to remain wedded to a military-driven strategic approach, perhaps a reflection of its thus far military-driven foreign policy, which Biden in fact promises to eschew. Australia and the UK have followed the US lead.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi, President Joe Biden, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga at the Quad Summit in the White House, Washington DC, September 24, 2021. Source: PMO

Will AUKUS disrupt the QUAD? India and the US have both repeatedly made it clear that the Quad is not a military alliance; it is a group of like-minded countries advancing “cooperation on regional challenges while reinforcing international rules and values that we believe underpin peace, prosperity and stability in the region”, in cooperation with other countries, ASEAN and other like-minded partners²². India’s Foreign Secretary has clarified on record that the QUAD and AUKUS are not groupings of a similar nature²³. The former is a

²¹ “Taiwan Applies to Join Pacific Trade Pact Week After China”, September 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-applies-join-pacific-trade-pact-cptpp-official-news-agency-2021-09-22/>

²² Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar at a Joint Press Availability, Remarks to Press, July 28, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-indian-external-affairs-minister-dr-subrahmanyam-jaishankar-at-a-joint-press-availability/>

²³ Transcript of Foreign Secretary’s Special Briefing on Prime Minister’s visit to USA, September 21, 2021, https://mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/34292/Transcript_of_Foreign_Secretarys_special_briefing_on_Prime_Ministers_visit_to_USA

plurilateral framework with a shared vision of the Indo-Pacific and a positive, wide-ranging agenda to address the issues of the day. AUKUS, on the other hand, is purely a security alliance between the US and two allies, to which India is not party. From India's perspective, it is neither relevant to the QUAD, nor will it have any impact on its functioning. (He also made it clear that there was no link between the QUAD itself and the India-US led Exercise Malabar).

An overt military component of the QUAD remains a distant prospect. Australia, insulated by both the Indonesian and Philippine archipelagos and over 4000 Km of ocean from China and at the receiving end of China's efforts to convert it into the poor white trash of Asia²⁴, has the luxury of choosing to bandwagon with the US because it faces no direct territorial threat. Japan, while facing an immediate territorial threat in the Senkaku Islands and the impact of a potential Taiwan contingency, remains bound by Article 9 of its constitution, with prospects for constitutional change being limited at best²⁵. It has no option but to remain cautious about overtly antagonising China.

Nor can India, with its disputed continental borders, choose to be part of an overt alliance hostile to China. India's best bet is to continue to stand up for core issues underpinning its territorial security as well as regional security and order, while striving to avoid or contain the conflict and build up its comprehensive national power for contingencies of the future.

The reality is that the military commitment by the US to the Indo-Pacific is still rhetorical; commitment of the requisite resources is still some distance away. It would be short-sighted for India to limit its options until the US commitment to the Indo-Pacific, and to mitigating India's challenges becomes clear and irrevocable.

There is disquiet in segments of India's commentariat about AUKUS resulting in the creation of a separate inner circle, with a path different from Quad. But multiple paths to the same objective may not be such a bad thing. For one, it divides China's focus, creating strategic uncertainty and forcing it to address multiple lines of opposition. For all its public bravado, China's leaders are careful and unlikely to take ill-judged risks. Meanwhile, speculation that AUKUS will divide the QUAD is premature. The potential for the two to

²⁴ Yu Lei, "Australia Risks Backsliding into a Poor country in Asia Pacific", The Global Times, August 31, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1199471.shtml>

²⁵ Michael Macarthur Bosack, "Will Japan's next PM take a shot at constitutional amendment", The Japan Times, September 22, 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/09/22/commentary/japan-commentary/next-pm-constitutional-amendment/>

complement each other is just as good. Much will depend on the clarity of communication and understanding between the QUAD partners going ahead.

Will AUKUS disrupt opposition to China in the Indo-Pacific? That depends to a large extent on how well the French pique is managed. French strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific remain the same, and its options to realise these interests haven't changed. The placatory actions of Biden and Morrison will be critical as they find ways to overcome the damage in the larger interest. The former and President Macron have agreed to open a process of "in-depth consultations, aimed at creating the conditions for ensuring confidence and proposing concrete measures toward common objectives", and to "meet in Europe at the end of October in order to reach shared understandings and maintain momentum in this process"²⁶. India, with its burgeoning strategic partnership with France, may well prove critical. India would also do well to note the lesson that allowing sentiment to overcome cold calculation in formulating geostrategy carries a high cost.

Southeast Asian reaction has remained muted. Regional nations will be concerned that the AUKUS decision will increase prospects for conflict in the critical South China Sea, thrusting them into the front line. On the other hand, there has been little progress in ASEAN nations strengthening their own ability to stand against Chinese assertion. It is noteworthy that the joint statement following the Seventh Indonesia–Australia 2 + 2 dialogue highlights convergence between the two nations on navigating a more contested Indo-Pacific region, but continues to focus on ASEAN centric mechanisms to underpin regional stability²⁷. There is a view in some circles that the strategic balance has tilted too strongly in favour of China and a more equitable balance is required. Concern in Indonesia about loss of ASEAN's much-prized centrality, however illusory it may be, continues to prevent adoption of a clear, unambiguous strategic path.

Geopolitics of Non-Proliferation

The non-proliferation aspect is also a factor. The S9G and PWR3 reactors on American and British SSNs use Highly Enriched Uranium, containing over 93% U-235, substantially more than the 85% required to define HEU as 'weapons-

²⁶ Joint Statement on the Phone Call between President Biden and President Macron", September 22, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/22/joint-statement-on-the-phone-call-between-president-biden-and-president-macron/>

²⁷ Seventh Indonesia – Australia Foreign and Defence Ministers 2+2 Meeting, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/peter-dutton/statements/seventh-indonesia-australia-foreign-and-defence-ministers-22>

grade'. The NPT permits non-nuclear states to remove fissile material from IAEA control for use in non-weapon military applications. To operate say six SSNs for about 30 years, Australia will need about three tons of HEU. Only about 25 Kg is sufficient to build a nuclear bomb. The technology offered to Australia thus creates an avenue for Australia to gain uncontrolled access to weapons-grade Uranium, even though Australia has gone to great lengths to explain that it has no intent of acquiring nuclear weapons.

In fact, French SSNs use LEU, enriched to less than 6%, enabling better compliance with the NPT.

It is relevant to note here that Iran also disavows any intention to acquire nuclear weapons. But such declarations carry little weight, as compared to capabilities. Clearly, different benchmarks for different nations will remain an established feature of global politics.

Australia has a long history of domestic opposition to nuclear power, for even power-generation purposes. It operates only one 20 MW thermal research reactor, used for generation of medical isotopes. Political opposition to the SSN project is expected, with the Adam Bandt, the leader of Australia's Green's Party, describing them as "floating Chernobyls" and vowing to oppose them²⁸. New Zealand's Jacinda Arden has announced that Australian SSNs will have to keep out of New Zealand waters. These factors could come into play in Australia's 2022 elections, with the possibility of the project itself being sidelined if Scott Morrison loses.

Conclusion

US alliances were crafted for the Cold War era when economic and military strength were synergised to contain the geopolitical adversary. That era came to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The confrontation today arises mainly from China's revisionism, from the US perspective. Territorial threats are a distraction. What China seeks is to reshape global rules in its favour, and a dominant voice in the new domains created by technological development. A strategy of containment is no longer possible, given the deep integration of China's economy in a globalised world and the lure of its vast market.

The AUKUS alliance indicates that the US is continuing to maintain its primary focus on a military response to the China challenge, instituting trilateral

²⁸ Josh Butler, "AUKUS questions but few answers as nuclear subs plan likely to exceed \$ 100 billion", September 17, 2021, <https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/politics/australian-politics/2021/09/17/aukus-nuclear-submarines-cost/>

collaboration to “enhance our joint capabilities and interoperability”²⁹. It will be quite a while before the AUKUS commitment to deliver SSNs to Australia becomes a reality. What is, however, clear, is that at a time when the world appears heading towards power balancing and increasing multipolarity, Australia has placed its bets firmly on a US-led world order. This is a net gain for the US at a time when its Asian allies had been vacillating and conflicted due to the contrary pulls of their economic and security interests. AUKUS indicates strong US intent to pursue strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific, including the strengthening of the military balance against China. How AUKUS will impact the QUAD’s objectives, meanwhile, remains to be seen.

²⁹ “UK, US and Australia Launch New Security Partnership”, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-us-and-australia-launch-new-security-partnership>



Delhi Policy Group
Core 5A, 1st Floor,
India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road
New Delhi - 110003
India

www.delhipolicygroup.org