

SHARP DIVIDES: ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE AUKUS TRILATERAL DEFENCE PACT

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The [joint appearance by the leaders of the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia](#), at the Naval Base Point Loma, U.S., this week, and their detailing about their [“AUKUS” trilateral defence pact](#) are significant in optics and substance, suggesting a new chapter in the global great power rivalry. There will be three phases in the agreement in the Indo-Pacific region, first announced in September 2021. Beginning this year, the U.S. and the U.K. navies will embed Australian personnel, and increase port visits to Australia to train together. In the second phase, U.S. and U.K. nuclear submarines will travel rotationally to Australia, and the U.S. will sell Australia up to five nuclear-powered Virginia-class submarines. Subsequently, a new submarine called the SSN-AUKUS, will be built and used by all three navies, with interoperable workings. The deal, the biggest for Australia, using British design and U.S. technology, is expected to cost \$368 billion. It is not hard to imagine who the target of such an alliance is. In his speech, U.K. leader Rishi Sunak said that the most recent challenges to the world have come from “Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine, China’s growing assertiveness [and] the destabilising behaviour of Iran and North Korea”. The new alliance is seen as a counter to China exerting its claims on Taiwan, with the idea that a naval fleet including nuclear-powered submarines based in Australia would be able to reach the South China Sea quickly.

Predictably, Beijing’s opposition has been the toughest — a “wrong and dangerous path” — while Russia has raised questions over nuclear proliferation, as Australia would join a group of countries that use nuclear-powered submarines. While U.S. President Joe Biden insisted the submarines would be nuclear-powered, but not nuclear-armed, Russia and China are expected to raise concerns over any violation of the Non Proliferation Treaty regime, at a meet between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow. New Zealand, Malaysia and Indonesia have indicated more muted discomfort. India has not reacted yet, in part due to the fact that the AUKUS countries have no doubt kept New Delhi briefed. For New Delhi, which has always seemed hesitant to explore more strategic and defence aspects in the Quad, AUKUS gives it a breather in the Indo-Pacific military calculus. India, as a voice for the global south, must do what it can to ensure that the announcement does not exacerbate already sharp divides between U.S.-led alliances and the Russia-China combine, and proves to be a deterrent rather than accelerating global conflict instead.

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