

WITH AUKUS, INDIA MUST KEEP ITS HEAD ABOVE WATER

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: QUAD and India

The announcement by the United States of a trilateral ‘enhanced security partnership’ involving Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) has taken everyone by surprise, competitors and allies alike. With close partners on both sides, India has maintained an ambiguous stand on the issue. A lot of commentary since has talked of how this is a welcome step for India to access technologies, build complementarities and so on. While it does present opportunities, the flip side is that AUKUS represents a threshold breach and could pose unique challenges for India, depending on how China responds to it, and the issue spiralling.

The decision by the U.S. to make a very rare exemption, even for its allies, to supply nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN) takes the whole issue of arms transfers and containing China’s expansion to a new level. Submarines are the most potent and secretive military platform to asymmetrically counter an adversary and an SSN represents the pinnacle. The entry barrier for acquiring these is very steep, proven by how few countries possess them; and once that is breached, there is no technological leap to counter it but only incremental measures to negate it, which would nonetheless be another expensive endeavour.

The U.S. has now set a precedence to this and how it unfolds and how long it remains an exception has to be seen. The next question is how will China, which has sharply reacted to the announcement of AUKUS, respond to this? Will it resort to further proliferation, in any manner, as it has done in the past, and likely involving its closest partner, Pakistan?

If so, the only country in the region which will face the real implications of this is India; for the others, it is more of stated positions and rules-based order which are a matter of convenience and not of survival. The whole Pakistani missile and nuclear weapons programme and its proliferation trail are proof of it.

The China threat notwithstanding, this development is as much, if not more, about the tussle between arms industries of the two sides which collectively dominate the global arms industry. A case in point is the leak, in 2016, of 22,000 pages of secret data on the capabilities of six Scorpene submarines being built for the Indian Navy by the French Naval Group (then DCNS) barely months after DCNS was declared the winner in the Australian tender, only to be thwarted by the U.S. five years later.

While the real intention (of the leak) and those responsible may never be known, the fallout, though likely coincidental, was on India. The Naval Group had then said that it may have been the victim of “economic warfare.”

Another tangent that needs to be observed as the initiative takes shape is whether AUKUS is an attempt by the U.S. to position Australia as a ‘Net Security Provider’ in the Indo-Pacific. This is especially so given India’s reluctance to add a military dimension to the Quadrilateral grouping comprising India, Australia, Japan and the U.S.

The Quad — as a grouping of major democracies in the Indo-Pacific — has seen momentum in terms of engagement in the last two years especially in the backdrop of a violent stand-off between India and China along the disputed boundary in Eastern Ladakh last year which is yet to be resolved. However, India has reiterated on several occasions that it sees the Quad as a

platform for consultations at the political and diplomatic level but does not see a military dimension to it. So, with Australia and Japan being U.S. allies, the limiting factor for deepening military engagement for the Quad as a grouping, beyond a point, is India.

Incidentally, the current Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Karambir Singh, since he assumed charge of the force in May 2019, had stated his reluctance in using the term ‘Net Security Provider’ and instead propagated the phrase, ‘Preferred Security Partner’.

Probably the best articulation of this was put forward in May 2018 by his predecessor and then Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Sunil Lanba, while delivering a talk at the Vivekananda International Foundation. Responding to questions, he stated that there were “dependencies” for group members on China and also the “uncertainty” of America when push comes to shove. He said, “So I don’t think there is [a] need for a military dimension to Quad... We are not going down that route. And I don’t think there is [a] need to go down that route.”

Admiral Lanba further said, “What do you think a military dimension will achieve? India is the only country in the Quad with a land border with China. In case of conflict... nobody will come and hold your hand.” The validation for this observation manifested itself in 2020 in the Himalayan ranges with a new normal now on the ground along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and the trust between India and China along with the agreements that held it in tatters.

More recently, on several occasions External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, while terming the Quad as a platform that looks at the future, has also echoed similar views.

Speaking at the Raisina Dialogue in April, he categorically stated that Quad will not be an ‘Asian NATO’ and added that “people need to get over this....” He had also highlighted 10 broad subjects of cooperation including vaccine collaboration, climate action, emerging technologies, resilient supply chains, semiconductors, disinformation, counterterrorism and maritime security among others.

The outcome of the first ever in-person meeting of Quad leaders in the U.S. on September 24 only reinforces this trend. The Quad countries have outlined cooperation in several important areas including high technology; military cooperation and a mention of China were conspicuous in their absence. Essentially, the Quad is taking shape as an organisation of broader cooperation among the four countries, while AUKUS, for now, remains an organisation for high-end military trade. This only gives further credence that the U.S. may be preparing Australia for a greater military role in the Indo-Pacific.

Afghanistan has shown that New Delhi cannot depend on or tag along with anyone to protect its national interests. Given the surprise and setback India received with the sudden exit of the U.S., the country can ill-afford to lower its guard by taking AUKUS at face value. While working with AUKUS through other platforms and advancing its own strategic cooperation with each of the countries, India also needs to offset any fallout of the development which will only unfold in the long term.

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