

# AUKUS COULD ROCK CHINA'S BOAT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: QUAD and India

The trilateral security agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) continues to be in the news. At the COP26 meeting at Glasgow, U.S. President Joe Biden tried to smoothen ruffled feathers when he candidly told his French counterpart, President Emmanuel Macron, that the Australian submarine deal with France had been handled clumsily. An assuaged France is bound to come around eventually since the Trans-Atlantic partnership is important for both sides. In regard to Australia, however, the kerfuffle over the cancelled submarine deal continues to dog relations. A piqued France harbours resentment at the Australian action, going by Mr. Macron's recent remarks at the G20 press conference on November 1.

There is also the matter of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) disunity over the emergence of AUKUS. The South-east Asian nations have been unable to agree on other issues before, such as developments in Myanmar or the strategic threats posed by China. While AUKUS is clearly an attempt by the U.S. to bolster regional security, including securing Australia's seaborne trade, any sudden accretion in Australia's naval capabilities is bound to cause unease in the region. In a statement on September 20, Australia had unambiguously reassured the region of its commitment to ASEAN centrality and its continued support for the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone Treaty as well as the Treaty of Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone.

Explained | Will AUKUS upset the Indo-Pacific balance?

Even though Australia has denied that AUKUS is a defence alliance, this hardly prevents China from exploiting ASEAN's concerns at having to face a Hobson's choice amidst worsening U.S.-China regional rivalry. True to style, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman has criticised AUKUS as an "exclusive bloc" and "clique" that gravely undermines regional peace and security and reflects a Cold War mentality. AUKUS is based on a shared commitment of its three members to deepening diplomatic, security and defence cooperation in the Indo-Pacific to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Even though this has not been stated explicitly, the rise of China, particularly its rapid militarisation and aggressive behaviour, is undoubtedly the trigger.

As such, there is nothing surprising about the U.S., the U.K. and Australia coming together. The U.S. and the U.K. have enjoyed a special defence partnership for decades. The U.S. and the U.K. have fought together as allies, together with Australia, in the Second World War. The U.S. shared nuclear weapons technology with the U.K. following the merging of the latter's nuclear weapons programme with the American Manhattan Project as early as in 1943. The first U.K. test was conducted in 1952 in the Montebello Islands in Australia, a country that still regards the British monarch as the head of state, whose powers are exercised constitutionally through her representative, the Governor-General of Australia. To suggest that these three nations have come together to forge a new defence pact is stating the obvious. They have been alliance partners all along.

For three nations, their relations with China have recently been marked by contretemps. Australia, especially, had for years subordinated its strategic assessment of China to transactional commercial interests. Much to China's chagrin, its policy of deliberately targeting Australian exports has not yielded the desired results. Instead of kow-towing, the plucky

Australian character has led Canberra to favour a fundamental overhaul of its China policy. The attempt to torment Australia has clearly backfired.

### The big deal behind the ruckus over AUKUS

That China's naval expansion and far-ranging forays in the oceanic space should have compelled Australia to revisit its defence and security policies should also not surprise anyone. As early as in 1942, during the Second World War, three Japanese midget submarines, launched from five large submarines that acted as launching platforms, had mounted a sneak attack in Sydney Harbour. Though the damage and casualties inflicted by the attack were limited, that brazen episode, combined by the bombing by Japanese warplanes of Darwin, also in 1942, drove home to Australia that its distant geographical location could not guarantee its security against a direct maritime threat.

In 2017 and 2019, the Talisman Sabre exercises (a biennial exercise that is led by either Australia or the U.S.), conducted by the Royal Australian Navy, were tagged by a Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) *Dongdiao*-class Type 815 auxiliary general intelligence (AGI) vessel. China also used the same type of vessel to monitor the multilateral Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise in 2018.

These developments, no doubt a portent of things to come, have cast a long shadow on Australia's trade and strategic interests.

### India is not a bystander in the AUKUS saga

The transfer of sensitive submarine technology by the U.S. to the U.K. is a *sui generis* arrangement based on their long-standing Mutual Defence Agreement of 1958. The AUKUS joint statement clearly acknowledges that trilateral defence ties are decades old, and that AUKUS aims to further joint capabilities and interoperability. The word "further" is key, since defence cooperation already exists. The other areas covered are cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence and quantum technologies, apart from undersea capabilities. The latter is the most visible part of the agreement, and potentially, a game-changer.

Elements in the broader agenda provide opportunities to the U.S., the U.K. and Australia to engage the regional countries. There are clear indications that New Zealand is open to cooperation with AUKUS in such areas, especially cyber, its nuclear-averse record notwithstanding. All three nations will also play a major role in U.S.-led programmes such as Build Back Better World, Blue Dot Network and Clean Network, to meet the challenge of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

The Quad and AUKUS are distinct, yet complementary. Neither diminishes the other. Whereas the Quad initiatives straddle the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, a Pacific-centric orientation for AUKUS has advantages. Such a strategy could potentially strengthen Japan's security as well as that of Taiwan in the face of China's mounting bellicosity. Shifting AUKUS's fulcrum to the Pacific Ocean could reassure ASEAN nations. It could also inure AUKUS to any insidious insinuation that accretion in the number of nuclear submarines plying the Indo-Pacific might upset the balance of power in the Indian Ocean.

China's potent military capacities must be taken seriously. China has a large and growing undersea fleet, including attack submarines, both nuclear-powered and diesel-electric. China's naval power is enabling it to challenge U.S. dominance in the Pacific beyond the first island chain. A U.S. that still boasts the world's most powerful military is perhaps tempted to look at effective means to militarily counter China. The Quad structure currently has neither the

mandate nor the capability to achieve this. There are limited options in the economic arena with China already having emerged as a global economic powerhouse. AUKUS, though, provides an opportunity to the U.S. to place proxy submarine forces to limit China's forays, especially in the Pacific Ocean.

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The country's existing laws are inadequate in dealing with climate change; India's situation is also unique

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