

# AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific

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## ABSTRACT:

*This paper analyses the role of the newly established security alliance of the Anglosphere, AUKUS, especially in relation to the Indo-Pacific region. The paper aims to examine the subject from three distinct perspectives: from a geopolitical one (what the current situation is in the Indo-Pacific region, the reasons why there is a need for a new alliance and the aims participants want to achieve with it); from a technical and geostrategic one (why it is important for Australia to maintain a nuclear submarine fleet, what could the direct objectives be and whether the new pact constitutes enough potential to realise the long-term strategic aims;) and from a regional, multilateral perspective (how AUKUS fits into the already existing network of military and intelligence alliances and how other countries of the region feel about its existence as well as the opportunities and risks associated with it). By taking into account all of these perspectives, I aim to give the reader a thorough understanding of the subject, and by providing ample geopolitical context I can also present certain assumptions regarding the future of AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific.*

**Keywords:** AUKUS, Indo-Pacific, Australia, USA, UK, China, nuclear submarines, geopolitics, regional security

**In September 2021, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia announced a new military alliance – dubbed the AUKUS – which explicitly aims to counter China in the Indo-Pacific region with the use of innovative technology and a network of complementing strategic pacts. Some countries of Southeast Asia hope that AUKUS will be reinstating the region’s lost strategic balance and will keep China’s aggressive policies at bay, while others fear it would only lead**

**the world into a new cold war, with the Indo-Pacific in its centre. In any case, AUKUS and the Anglosphere's wider strategies do have their own risks, but at this point they feel that this is the only viable option for effective containment of China, or America would have to face the unavoidable fall of its naval hegemony.**

## **Into a new cold war**

### **AUKUS as the globe's newest geopolitical player**

The announcement of AUKUS has taken the whole world by surprise, even though – geostrategically speaking – its creation has been long overdue. The fall of the Soviet Union did not bring about the era of global peace and democratisation – as Fukuyama famously predicted – but merely heralded a brief period of American hegemony before a different challenger arose. China has been steadily growing both its economic and military potential in the last couple of decades and now poses as a direct threat to the Western led global order. As Beijing has been displaying a more and more aggressive behaviour towards its neighbouring countries, some sort of strategic containment became inevitable. Similarly to NATO, which was created in 1949 to contain the advances of the Soviets primarily in Europe, AUKUS was also established for a similar purpose towards China in the Indo-Pacific region.

Despite not being as complex a security pact as NATO, AUKUS is still more than just a submarine deal. Its purpose is to pool military resources, innovation and technology capable of deterring China in its immediate and wider neighbourhood. It does not need to be more than that at this point, as today's rapidly changing world does not accommodate the kind of bureaucratic and strictly rules-based formations (such as NATO) that effectively. Instead, the new security infrastructure of the Indo-Pacific needs to be based on a loose collection of different formations with different goals, with AUKUS being only one piece of the puzzle, albeit quite an

important one. It does not replace but strengthens the other regional international formations, such as the Five Eyes, the Quad or the ASEAN.<sup>1</sup>

### **Shifting the pivot of geostrategic thinking**

Throughout the last three decades, the geopolitical pivot of world politics – in a Mackinderian sense – has undoubtedly been the Middle East (just as Eastern Europe had been in the better half of the 20th century),<sup>2</sup> with the global powers of the multipolar world competing for the control and resources of this highly volatile region. The Middle East is still a key region geographically, both from an economic and a strategic viewpoint, but with the emergence of China as the US' sole challenger for global hegemony in the coming decades, its importance started to fade while that of South-East Asia, – and the wider Indo-Pacific region –, has begun to grow.

The significance of the region is hard to overstate. Two-thirds of the world's container trade passes through it every day, it is home to over 50% of the global population and it is rich in mineral and marine resources. The Indo-Pacific has become the foremost hub of technology production and trade in the world and the region also accommodates some of the most rapidly developing financial centres as well. While most countries of the Indo-Pacific have traditionally been part of the US-led global economic network since the end of the Second World War, in the last decade China has become more and more assertive in the region – using both soft and hard power methods – forcing the West to respond with a series of strategic measures and countermeasures to attain Beijing's dominance over the region.<sup>3</sup>

This geostrategic shift also signals the emergence of a new “cold war”, a bipolar world order where every region – especially the Indo-Pacific – has started to become the strategic battleground between China and the US. If the West turns out to be unable to contain Beijing within its own neighbourhood, the current

status quo could disappear in just a couple of decades, bringing forth the much-prophesised “Chinese 21th century”.

## The rise of the Anglosphere

It is no surprise that the strategic military alliance, that became the AUKUS, was not launched by France or other European countries (that also happen to have interests in the region), nor that the initiative did not conceive as a branch of NATO for that matter. When planning strategic deterrence against China, effectiveness is key as many fear that the West is already late. So, regardless of the fact that France had closed a submarine deal with Australia earlier, the magnitude of the task needed much more effective ways of cooperation than the European model, such as those that could be provided by the Anglosphere.

Globalisation had proven – among others – that truly successful cooperation between certain countries in the 21st century can only be achieved if it is based on common cultural roots; as advanced technology and global supply chains brought all nations closer together, culture has become the tool which we use to differentiate ourselves and our goals from everyone else’s. And while the European Union is still struggling to create a shared European identity, the Anglosphere has a natural cultural bond, which gives it an advantage in the current age. Furthermore, the geographical distance between the members of the Anglosphere has resulted in them having a great number of diverging geopolitical and civilisational goals over the centuries, which made them develop not a *rules*-based but a loose, *network*-based cooperation, which gives members a high degree of freedom without having to sacrifice efficacy only to maintain a bureaucratic framework. Common culture serves that purpose naturally. The finest example for this had been the Five Eyes, the intelligence alliance which worked seamlessly for eighty years and will continue to do so, as AUKUS does not

mean to replace or weaken it, but in fact it will be part of the same wide system of Anglo cooperation.<sup>4</sup>

## Defence or Offence: strategic objectives and opportunities

### The case for nuclear submarines

The backbone of the AUKUS deal is of course the nuclear submarines to be produced by Britain for Australia. This is also the reason France felt “backstabbed” by the pact, as it signed a submarine deal with Australia earlier which got scraped unilaterally by the latter for the sake of British crafts. The reason for Canberra’s decision is not only its above-mentioned connection to the Anglosphere and the various opportunities it could deliver in the long run, but also something simply technical. The French submarines would have used conventional, diesel fuel, whereas the British ones will run on nuclear power. From a strategic standpoint, the significance of this difference is hard to overlook.

First of all, Australia needed submarines to be able to patrol its territorial waters against the increasing number of Chinese violations of it – both in forms of fishing and military vessels, including a large number of spy ships and submarines lately. Both conventional and nuclear-powered submarines could have served this role perfectly, but while in the case of the former this defensive purpose is all it could have fulfilled, the nuclear option also provides broad offensive capabilities – primarily to be used as a tool of deterrence. Australia currently has no means to

strike China from its mainland (Beijing’s ballistic capabilities are well-known) so these submarines will be there to give Canberra this long-needed edge.



The Economist

Australian submarine deployments to marine chokepoints.  
 Source: The Economist, 2021

To effectively patrol the key marine chokepoints of the Indo-Pacific region, conventional submarines are just not enough. Consider the map above. Deployed from Sterling naval base in Perth, diesel-powered submarines could travel as far as the South China Sea, but the greater the distance the shorter the time they can

spend *on station* before having to return for refuelling. Nuclear-powered submarines can stay on station for around sixty days longer than their conventional counterparts, giving them a huge strategic advantage. Furthermore, they can reach far more distant targets, such as the Strait of Hormuz or Taiwan, and needless to say this latter plays a significant part in the geostrategic competition between the US and China. Finally, we might also note that China has its own nuclear submarine fleet as well (with twelve crafts, the world's fourth biggest as a result), so these new submarines would just rebalance the scale. If Australia and therefore the West want to protect their allies in the region and not just themselves, a locally deployed nuclear submarine fleet is imperative to have in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>5</sup>

### **Can deterrence work against China?**

Beijing's aggressive behaviour towards its neighbours along the South China Sea, especially Taiwan, has given ample reason for the West to come up with deterrence strategies. The US' allies and long-time partners in the region often feel threatened by the frequent violations of their airspace and maritime territories by the Chinese air force and navy. Many of these countries are key economic partners of Washington, while others host a number of American military bases on their territory and thus constitute a strategic target for Beijing. The defence of these allies are of paramount importance for the US if it seeks to retain its momentary global advantage over China, and one way of preventing Chinese attacks on these countries can be deterrence. By looking at AUKUS it is clear that the US has already committed to this path. But can it work against China?

To maintain a credible deterrence policy, the opponents of Beijing would have to match their naval power both in terms of firepower and the number of ships. Now the eight nuclear-powered submarines with conventional (likely Tomahawk) missiles will not be enough to keep China at bay, especially given the fact that they



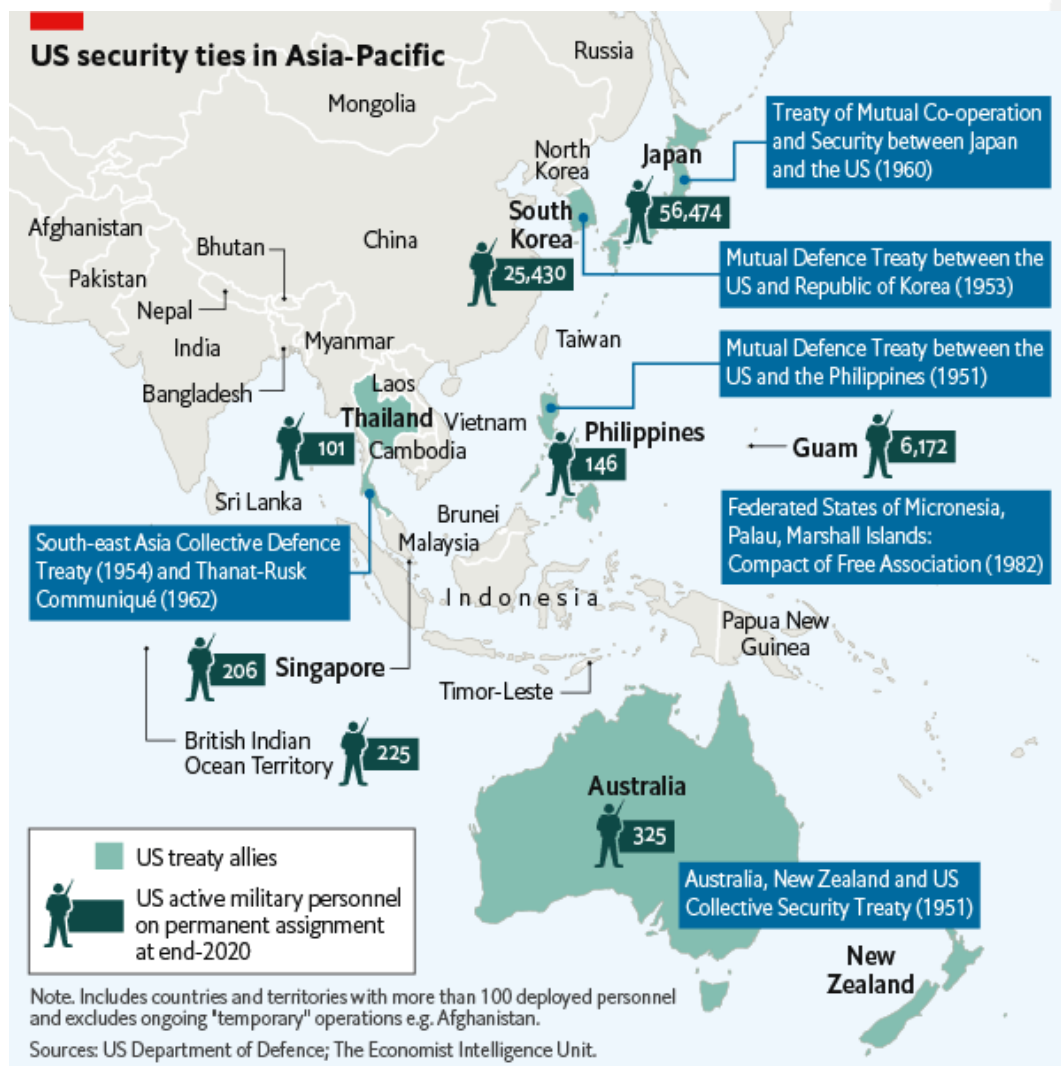
are unlikely to be operational before the early 2030s and that China builds a new nuclear submarine every one and a half years. That is why one of the key principles of AUKUS is interoperability. With regards to the long-term innovation projects, the submarines will only be one element, along with a number of new ships and integrated drone systems, such as unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs) and surface vehicles (USVs), belonging to the US Navy, that aims to increase its annual budget by nearly USD 80 billion by 2050.<sup>6</sup> China's current regional superiority therefore is planned to be matched by this advantage in innovation facilitated by the web of alliances and partnerships discussed above.

Nonetheless, while this looks like a viable path, it is not free of risks and dangers. China might take these widening partnerships at its doorstep as a threat too big for its global aspirations to just sit idly while America renews its entire naval infrastructure and strengthens its position in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, Beijing could opt for more radical ways of stabilising its grip in the region – by invading Taiwan or other strategic targets, for instance – before the Western gale pays off. This possibility is also shown by the official communiqués published by the Chinese government in the wake of AUKUS' birth. A day after the deal was signed, for instance, the *Global Times*, the Chinese Communist Party's foremost English-language mouthpiece ran an editorial, in which it warned that any more provocations will result in countermeasures against Australia and its allies, and the punishment will be carried out "with no mercy".<sup>7</sup> And this is precisely why some countries of the region are reluctant to join or they are even hostile to the idea of AUKUS, as they fear it will only bring about the wrath of the great red dragon.

## **Emerging new alliances**

### **Existing alliances in the Indo-Pacific**

During the decades of the Cold War, the United States has signed a number of mutual security and defence treaties with several countries from the Indo-Pacific region, making them the primary allies in Southeast Asia, involved in the containment of the aggressive expansion of the Soviet Union. Similarly, these same countries are likely to serve as the local core of the alliance to contain China in the coming decades along AUKUS. The original treaties (signed between 1951 and 1982) include pacts with Indo-Pacific countries such as Thailand and the Philippines, and of course Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea to mention the most important ones.<sup>8</sup>



Primary US allies in the Indo-Pacific.  
Source: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021

In addition to these proper allies, there are certain so-called “long-standing partners” and “emerging partners”, that the current US administration envisages to have a greater role in the forming geostrategic plan for the Indo-Pacific. The former category includes Singapore and Taiwan, while the latter would primarily mean Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia, which are also needed for building the so-called FOIP (“*Free and Open Indo-Pacific*”), the same as Japan’s Shinzo Abe called his network of new economic partnerships built explicitly around the need to counter China’s attempts to gain strategic control over the region.<sup>9</sup>

Another important security alliance in the region is the Quad (*Quadrilateral Security Dialogue*, QSD), which constitutes the United States, India, Japan and Australia, launched for the first time in 2007 and then re-established again in 2017 during the ASEAN summit in Manila. Its goal was to create a direct intergovernmental security forum to counter Beijing’s expansion on the South China Sea and in the wider Indo-Pacific, and to ensure free and open trade (FOIP) continues in the region. The Quad also held a number of major naval exercises which aimed to secure the most important shipping lanes in face of hypothetical disruptions, many of which go near the contested island groups of the South China Sea. In any case, in the wake of the AUKUS, the Quad’s role will increase significantly and it will be integrated into the wider alliance network in the coming years.<sup>10</sup>

### **For and Against AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific**

In the wake of the announcement of AUKUS, several countries expressed varying degrees of support or disapproval for the concept, for certain understandable reasons. Those who supported it see it as a way to secure the future of their independence and the stability of the nearby shipping lanes, while others fear it will endanger their current status by forcing the region into a new cold war.

One of the smaller countries that embraced the formation of AUKUS was the Philippines, one of the major US allies in the region. The country’s foreign secretary

Teodoro Locsin praised AUKUS, as it would finally address the military “imbalance” in Southeast Asia, make allies feel more secure and shorten their response time to counter threats on the South China Sea.<sup>11</sup> Another such country was Singapore, whose Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong expressed his hope that AUKUS would *“contribute constructively to the peace and stability of the region and complement regional architecture.”*<sup>12</sup> India and Japan, along with South Korea – the three largest economies in the Indo-Pacific outside China – have also expressed their unambiguous support for the pact, meaning that all four Quad members are behind it which could give the security alliance a major boost in the future.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, the countries that voiced their concerns over the escalating arms race were Malaysia and Indonesia. Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob, for instance, fears that AUKUS *“would provoke other powers to act more aggressively in the region, especially in the South China Sea”* and instead his country opts to preserve ASEAN as a *“zone of peace, freedom and neutrality.”*<sup>14</sup> Indonesia expressed a similar stance, as its foreign ministry stated it was *“very concerned about the continued arms race and projection of power in the region.”*<sup>15</sup> After all, for these regional powers whose economies depend mainly on China, it is a real concern to be caught in the middle of Beijing’s and Washington’s global competition.

The two US-leaning countries of the Indo-Chinese peninsula – Thailand and Vietnam – have taken much more subtle approaches. Both countries maintain excellent ties with Beijing and fear that if they take sides that would endanger their position with either world powers, thus remained officially neutral in the question of AUKUS. Yet, despite no explicit endorsement, Vietnam has in fact showed will for greater participation in the emerging network of deterrence, as it invited US Vice President Harris to a summit in August, where the parties condemned China’s *“bullying and excessive maritime claims”* while also signing a defence deal with Japan aimed to counter Beijing’s growing military influence.<sup>16</sup> Thailand, on the other

hand, leans more towards the opinion that AUKUS would endanger the region's increasingly fragile balance.<sup>17</sup>

The last key country in this regard would be Taiwan, whose current situation is one of the main reasons AUKUS came into being in the first place. After Australia and the US stated their intention to strengthen their ties with their “critical partner”<sup>\*</sup> and continue to support a peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues (partly through AUKUS), the Taiwanese ministry of foreign affairs responded by sincerely thanking the alliance for its “*firm and open*” support and stated that it will work closely with the AUKUS countries to “*jointly safeguard peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.*”<sup>18</sup>

### **Future of AUKUS: is enlargement possible?**

We are still at a very early stage of AUKUS so it is highly unlikely to see any enlargement happen in the next couple of years, to say the least; perhaps only after the alliance will have proven its worth amidst the complex dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. Further escalations on the South China Sea could also influence the future of AUKUS in this regard, both for the worse and the better, as some countries could feel the need to join for protection as others would further distance themselves from the Anglo alliance to avoid angering China. Nevertheless, the possibility of enlargement has already been voiced by many foreign policy analysts.

For the moment, the AUKUS and the Quad are not meant to be integrated into one larger security bloc, but complement each other as this way both can enjoy a wider freedom to pursue their specific interests with their specific means. But if the future brings about a more dire need for a stronger alliance in which the two

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<sup>\*</sup> None of the AUKUS members formally recognise Taiwan as an independent country, while acknowledging but not recognising China's claim over it either.

blocs' interests seem more closely aligned, then Japan (and later India) would likely be the first to formally join AUKUS as well.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, Quad members could open a possible way for France to regain its strategic foothold in the region and continue with President Macron's envisaged Indo-Pacific policy as well. After all, France is no mere spectator, it is one of the resident powers in the region with 1.6 million citizens. France and its strategic interests should not be ignored by the Anglosphere (as it seemed to be the case during the AUKUS fiasco), but welcomed as a valuable partner once the *modus operandi* of this new network of alliances has begun to take shape.<sup>20</sup> Until France and the Anglosphere sort out their differences and reach consensus on how specific strategic aims should be pursued, Paris could strengthen its security ties with India and Japan, which would make its (far from unlikely) future inclusion into AUKUS considerably easier.

## Conclusions

The Anglosphere's new military alliance – AUKUS – has redrawn the strategic realities of the Indo-Pacific region, ushering in a new global geopolitical paradigm. It clearly shows that the tensions between the United States and China have reached a new level, which not only requires economic solutions but new strategic partnerships as well as the two superpowers race for global dominance.

The purpose of AUKUS, – apart from being a trilateral pact for closer military cooperation as well as pooling resources and innovation –, is to serve as the core of a network of alliances which, by complementing each other, could provide an efficient and flexible way of countering Chinese advances in the Indo-Pacific. The long-term strategy is built on the principle of deterrence, even though it could be

a decade until every piece falls into place – a weakness Beijing will be likely to take advantage of.

The most visible aspect of AUKUS is to provide the Australian fleet with a number of nuclear-powered submarines, which are indispensable in case of deterrence against China, as they give Canberra the ability to operate far from its shores, to track Chinese naval movements on and along the South China Sea and to patrol valuable maritime chokepoints in the Indo-Pacific. This undoubtedly more aggressive China policy compared to the previous ones however is likely to further contribute to the deterioration of the China-West relations and could fuel a dangerous arms race in the coming years or even decades.

This is also the reason not every country caught in-between supports the idea of AUKUS, even though the majority seems to welcome the concept. The most important long-standing regional allies of the United States (such as India, Japan and South Korea) have expressed their unambiguous support – and in case of future enlargement, they would be the most likely candidates as well – along with smaller countries, such as the Philippines, Singapore and (implicitly) Vietnam. Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, on the other hand, remain critical of the AUKUS as they fear it would only lead to the worsening of the situation.

Regardless of its specific paths and outcomes, AUKUS signals a considerable shift in global geostrategic movements and will likely play a major role in shaping the future political atmosphere of our planet.

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