

THE AUKUS SECURITY PACT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON THE INDO-PACIFIC SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract: In September 2021, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia entered into a new security partnership, that is, a trilateral security pact called for short: “AUKUS”. Having already cooperated closely together in various political and security formats, the AUKUS deepens the maritime component of their collaboration. This contribution discusses the strategic motives behind the establishment of the AUKUS and its potential implications for the security architecture in the Indo-Pacific, including possible new flexible partnerships. Geographically, the focus rests on the situation in the South China Sea. The South China Sea is a critical hotspot where China is acting increasingly assertive. Securing freedom of navigation and trade in the South China Sea is a vital national interest for the US, Australia, and the UK. This contribution will examine the maritime power potentials of the AUKUS members vis-à-vis China, discussing the importance of nuclear-powered submarines for power projection in the Indo-Pacific. Last but not least, it will address the fact that the announcement of the AUKUS and the cancellation of Australia’s previous submarine deal with France not only surprised the European Union but demonstrated the lack of geostrategic importance of this economically strong but in the Indo-Pacific militarily irrelevant actor.

Keywords: AUKUS, Indo-Pacific, Quad, China, South China Sea, EU.

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INTRODUCTION

“Indo-Pacific” is a relatively new geostrategic and geo-economic concept, first introduced by Japan’s former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during his first term in office in 2007 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2007). A decade later, Japan deepened its Indo-Pacific strategy. Australia (in 2017) and the United States (US, in 2019) followed suit. In recent years, certain European powers have also presented their Indo-Pacific strategies, namely France (in 2019), Germany, and the Netherlands (both in 2020), as well as the European Union (EU, in 2021). The United Kingdom (UK) has no specific Indo-Pacific strategy, but this region plays a major role in its foreign and security strategy issued in March 2021 and designed to promote “Global Britain in a competitive age” (Government of the UK, 2021). In comparison to the other Western strategies, the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy lacks vision and ambition (Gerstl, 2021). The strategies of the Western nations and Japan strongly overlap, in particular with regard to the aim of upholding the existing multilateral, rules-based order and freedom of navigation and trade in the South and East China Seas. The key to maintaining the rules-based order is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as it is the only organization that has successfully established trans-continental cooperation formats in which all great powers work together (Gerstl, 2022, pp. 27–45). Because the ASEAN is still useful for them, all major actors, including the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the US, formally endorse ASEAN’s regional centrality in the Indo-Pacific. The ASEAN, though, is no security organization. The multilateral ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), led by the ASEAN, is also only a forum for diplomatic talks, not a robust organization able to conduct preventive diplomacy or sanction norm-breakers. Thus, the Indo-Pacific security architecture consists of mostly bilateral and a few multilateral cooperation formats, which, however, remain untested as they have not yet faced a major crisis. The defense anchor is still the US, with mutual defense agreements with Australia and New Zealand (ANZUS), Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea, and less far-reaching agreements with other nations, notably Taiwan and Thailand. Apart from its military bases in the Indo-Pacific (the largest are in Japan and South Korea), the 7th US Fleet marks a strong American presence in the region. Before the AUKUS, no European power was a member of a US-led security mechanism in the Indo-Pacific. With regard to the security and military dimensions, significant differences in the Indo-Pacific strategies can be found. Lacking credible power projection capabilities, in particular after Brexit in 2021, the

EU regards itself mainly as a normative power and focuses on being a good international citizen and providing political and diplomatic support to regional governance, notably its partnership with the ASEAN, and improving human security. Brussels also highlights economic and trade collaboration. Furthermore, the EU seeks closer cooperation with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), consisting of the US, Australia, Japan, and India, but only on narrowly defined “issues of common interests such as climate change, technology, or vaccines” (European Commission and High Representative of the Union, 2021, p. 4).

Common security interests have not been explored so far. Another likely field of close collaboration among Western and like-minded Asian countries concerns infrastructure and connectivity. The EU’s Global Gateway Initiative needs to be highlighted in this sense, but it hardly counters China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Another commonly stated aim is to promote democracy and human rights. However, in a region where the majority of the regimes are semi-democratic or authoritarian, this objective could lead to political tensions with the local partners. The EU is a respected actor and is highly regarded as an important partner for economic cooperation and strengthening global and regional governance in many Indo-Pacific nations, notably in Southeast Asia. The EU and its members rank among the top investors, trade partners, and providers of Official Development Aid (ODA). Keen to promote regional cooperation, the EU offers technical support to the ASEAN. The EU members, notably France, Germany, and the Netherlands, are also important arms providers in the Indo-Pacific. However, Southeast Asian decision-makers became in 2021 more skeptical about the EU’s true influence and its ability to contribute to maintaining the regional order, compared to the US and China (Seah et al., 2021). A major reason could be the increasingly obvious lack of the EU’s hard power capacities to defend the rules-based order or militarily support its partners, especially in the background of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which signals a return to traditional geo-politics.

THE AUKUS: A BIG SURPRISE

The BRI, but even more importantly, China’s more active, if not assertive, foreign policy under Secretary-General and President Xi Jinping, were key reasons for the stronger political and security engagement of the Western powers in the Indo-Pacific. Their aim is to check China’s rising

power in a comprehensive manner. From a security point of view, especially concerning are the two hotspots, Taiwan and the South China Sea (the latter will be assessed in the following). The AUKUS, an enhanced trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, launched on September 15, 2021, is a direct response to China's increasing military capabilities. However, not only China but all regional and outside players in the Indo-Pacific are affected by this US-led security format, as it has the potential to fundamentally alter the power dynamics in the region. Above all, the AUKUS is a clear political commitment by Washington, Canberra, and London to strengthen their collaboration in the vital Indo-Pacific region. This agreement will further deepen the already existing strong defense ties and the interoperability of these three Anglo-Saxon partners, which are already connected through defense treaties (US with Australia and New Zealand – ANZUS) and multilateral cooperation formats (e.g., Five Eyes); Australia is also a close NATO partner. The AUKUS, though, is unlikely to develop into an Indo-Pacific NATO, even though the admission of further members cannot be ruled out. In fact, the membership of Japan, already a Quad partner, would make sense from a political and security perspective. In line with John Mearsheimer's (2001) recommendations to US policy-makers to try to prevent China from becoming the regional hegemon in East Asia or the Indo-Pacific more generally at the expense of the US, Washington aimed to create, in the form of the AUKUS, a "local block" with constant superior sea power. The United States clearly demands from its Indo-Pacific and European allies stronger defense efforts, especially in the Indo-Pacific *theatre*. The Australian plan in 2016 to renew the submarine fleet was principally welcomed. However, the choice of twelve conventional submarines, manufactured by the French Naval Group (formerly DCNS), was not fully in line with the interests of the US navy: a major concern was the lack of interoperability. This problem has now been resolved as Australia announced, together with the establishment of the AUKUS, the signing of a new deal with the US on acquiring eight to ten state-of-the-art nuclear-powered submarines. Neither the EU nor France had prior information about the establishment of the AUKUS. France and the EU were even more caught on the wrong foot when Canberra informed Paris about the cancellation of the 66 billion US dollar submarine deal with France. As a side note, many observers were surprised by Australia's initial submarine deal with France, as the Japanese consortium of Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Kawasaki Shipbuilding was regarded "as the front-runner" (Soble, 2016). Moreover, Australia and Japan already closely cooperated at this time in the Quad. Besides, some difficulties

also occurred in the short cooperation phase with the French Naval Group. The French President Emmanuel Macron and his government expressed anger and astonishment about Australia's decision – the loss of a signature arms deal, the suddenly strained relations with an important strategic partner in a key region of rapid economic development and strategic importance, and a bitter loss for the French shipbuilding industry and its export strategy were a shock for France. It has to be mentioned that France and Europe have misjudged Australia's historical strong connection with the UK and the US and overstated their own strategic relevance in a region that is 10,000 kilometers away from Europe (Tertrais, 2021). The AUKUS and the new submarine deal demonstrate the lack of geostrategic importance of the EU in the Indo-Pacific due to its unambitious regional strategy and its lack of hard power. Australia is economically strongly integrated into the Indo-Pacific but is sometimes regarded by certain Indo-Pacific governments as not fully belonging to the region, as it is perceived as a Western nation. Indeed, Australia is culturally and ideologically clearly located in the Western camp and seems prepared to take on a more prominent strategic and security role in the Indo-Pacific. For 15 years, China has been Australia's main trade partner and also an important source of foreign direct investment. However, due to bilateral political tensions, Canberra did not join the BRI. Because of Canberra's demand for an international investigation into the causes of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, the PRC has targeted Australia with economic sanctions. All in all, the cooperation, and notably the trust base, with the like-minded US is much deeper, as Australia cannot defend its huge territory without US support. Brexit, in force since January 2021, has dramatically changed London's strategic position in Europe and the world. Consequently, a major motive for joining the AUKUS pact was, in addition to the general opposition to China, London's aspiration to seek a more global role after Brexit. The economically important Indo-Pacific region (India, Burma, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, and New Zealand), where it once had colonies, is an almost logical choice for increased strategic engagement. An important diplomatic and economic success would be London's admission to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).¹ Nevertheless, economically, the EU and the US will

¹ Ironically, China also applied for CPTPP membership in 2021 – in a trade forum which was initially created by President Obama to counter-balance the PRC. During his first days in office, his successor, Donald Trump, cancelled this project in 2018 because he was critical of any multilateral trade regime.

remain the more important partners for London. Moreover, due to its strong and modern military, the UK remains a key pillar of NATO and thus crucial for Europe's defense.

CHINA'S LIMITED NAVAL POWER CAPABILITIES: THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Not only the EU, but even China, was caught by surprise by the announcement of the AUKUS pact. Beijing voiced immediately after the AUKUS launch criticism and anger, both about the new grouping and the submarine deal (Girard, 2021). In an editorial, the *Global Times* (2021), the English daily tabloid of the Chinese *People's Daily*, stated: "Washington is losing its mind by trying to rally its allies against China, creating antagonism and destruction beyond its control." For China, a rising regional actor with global geostrategic ambitions, the AUKUS format creates a new strategic situation. The Chinese leadership understands the impact of this change – first, Australia will in the near future be equipped with nuclear-power submarines (SSN) instead of the planned conventional submarines (SS).² Canberra ruled out acquiring nuclear weapons from the US. Nonetheless, concerns have been raised about the submarine deal's potential impact on the proliferation of sensitive technology and the already ongoing Indo-Pacific arms race (Masuhr & Schepers, 2022). Second, it will not only become a stronger regional (naval) power but officially join the US and the UK in a security pact obviously directed against China's interests in the Indo-Pacific Region. The PRC, the challenger to the still dominant US in the Indo-Pacific, is well aware of its limited naval capabilities but attempts to compensate for them through military and other means. It aims to buy time by building on geostrategic and geo-economic instruments such as the BRI and, in particular, its maritime component. China establishes a network of near-sea bases (such as Djibouti, which is close to the Bab-el-Mandeb chokepoint) and leases ports in the Indo-Pacific and Africa, which can be used by its navy if built into deep-water ports. Overall, Beijing continues to strongly invest in its maritime forces, though it remains comparatively weak, despite the ambitious modernization plans, especially compared with the dominant

²SSN: ship submersible nuclear; US navy abbreviation for a submarine (hunter, nuclear technology-drive); SS: ship submersible; US navy abbreviation for a submarine (hunter, conventional technology-drive).

US (Lemahieu & Leng, pp. 8–12). This is particularly true in the South China Sea. The South China Sea interlinks East Asia with the Indian Ocean. This major operational space, or main *theatre*, is crossed by one of the most important global sea lanes and has two major chokepoints, namely the Malacca and the Singapore Strait. This sea line is an indispensable lifeline for both economic and maritime operations connecting East Asia to Oceania, Europe, Africa, and the Eastern part of the Americas. Accordingly, the South China Sea is a vital component of the maritime silk road but also for the US, the Southeast Asian nations, Japan, and Australia, which all depend economically on freedom of navigation and unimpeded trade. China and Taiwan claim roughly 90 percent of the South China Sea territory, as illustrated by the contested nine-dash line. There are significant overlaps with the territorial claims of Vietnam (Hanoi also claims the Paracel and Spratly Islands), the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei. Since 2008, tensions in the South China Sea have further increased. In the last decade, the PRC (and Vietnam) started to militarize artificial islands. Moreover, China hinders oil and gas exploration and fishing activities of the other littoral states while conducting such activities in their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). The PRC dispatches both coast guard and law enforcement vessels as well as a flotilla of “civilian” fishermen to Chinese claimed land features across the South China Sea (Sebastian, 2021). According to the award of the Arbitral Tribunal of the Permanent Court of Arbitration of July 2016, China’s nine-dash line, based on so-called historic rights, has no legal basis under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Furthermore, the Tribunal concluded that no land feature in the large Spratly archipelago is legally an island and thus not entitled to a 200 nautical mile EEZ. It also confirmed that artificial islands have no EEZ, if they were legally no islands before the building activities started. The arbitration was initiated by the Philippines in 2013, because the negotiations with China stalled and Chinese assertiveness increased. Yet, Beijing regards the ruling as null and void, so far failing to comply with it (Gerstl, 2022, p. 13). China’s behavior proves that international law cannot be enforced against a great power if it refuses to accept the rules of the game. This fact illustrates the key shortcoming of the diplomatic approach of the ASEAN and the four Southeast Asian claimants to managing and mitigating the territorial disputes. The ASEAN lacks the means to enforce rules such as the envisioned legally binding regional code of conduct between the ASEAN and China. Meanwhile, the US demonstrates its military and, in particular, its naval strength in the South

China Sea. The cornerstone of US strategy in the Indo-Pacific and globally is *power projection*. In short, this concept (as a term of International Relations Theory) means the capacity of a state to deploy and sustain military forces outside its territory. The Indo-Pacific is a maritime region, and the geographical configuration of the Indo-Pacific *theatre* requires strong maritime power capabilities. Only a country with imposing naval forces can be considered a *global power* (Scholik, 2015). In this regard, there is only one great power with a globally deployable navy that is unrivaled by other powers, namely the United States. Regularly conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), the US navy sails through the 12 nautical mile zone of Chinese claimed land features, a move China also regularly protests. Started during the Obama presidency, the even more China-skeptical Trump administration stepped up the number of FONOPs (Storey, 2020). Australia, France, the UK, and Japan conduct naval maneuvers in the South China Sea, too, individually and together with partners, but do not usually label their activities “FONOP” in order not to provoke China too much. Closer cooperation between the US, Australian, and British navies increases the likelihood of joint FONOPs. At least the number of naval maneuvers will increase. The *Global Times* (2021) ridiculed Australia as the “running dog of the US”, downplayed its military capacities, and warned: “If Australia dares to provoke China more blatantly because of that, or even find fault militarily, China will certainly punish it with no mercy”. Acquiring nuclear-powered hunter submarines is strategically of utmost importance for the fifth continent to be able to contribute to the protection of the vital sea lines in the South China Sea. So far, the Australian navy has not been able to cope with bigger naval tasks due to a lack of equipment – it owns no aircraft carriers, only conventional submarines. These limits with regard to the circle of action (with SS in near-coastal areas only) cannot contribute to more “strategic” tasks such as *power projection* or far-away operations with other allies. SS are basically strictly defense-oriented, while SSNs are crucial to ensure the security of aircraft carrier strike groups and an attack capability under sea, wherever they are deployed. It is understood that the third group of submarines, ship submersible ballistic nuclear (SSBN)³, are not

³ US navy abbreviation for a submarine (nuclear technology drive, nuclear ballistic missiles). It is a “strategic” weapon system in the logic of mutually assured destruction (MAD): even after a first strike against a country with SSBN capability, a SSBN can fire its own missiles on the attacking country; the inherent logic means: strike first, die second.

part of the US-Australia deal. Actually, only the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council possess this submarine class, which can carry intercontinental nuclear missiles. It is hard to dispute that the US is and will, for at least some decades, remain the hegemonic global naval power. For China, this is especially concerning in the South China Sea, but also in the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. The US has ten carrier strike groups (CSG), all the necessary hardware and software to deploy and have them combat-ready in every imaginable crisis *theatre* at the same time.⁴ As a military principle, four to five carrier strike groups should be permanently deployed. No other navy can currently challenge or match the power of the US navy. China is working hard to close the gap, but it will take until 2035 or even beyond before it can maintain two, or at best three, aircraft carrier strike groups. The allied system of the US in the Indo-Pacific consists of hard and software naval capabilities, capable of operating with the US navy carrier strike groups. In the submarine area, the AUKUS will be enhanced with eight Australian SSNs in the near future. As Sam Roggeveen emphasizes, the AUKUS hard power arsenal is strategically important because “(...), military capabilities can drive policy – what you have determines what you do”. China, without a major naval ally, has to take this additional future strength and a possibly more assertive AUKUS strategy into its considerations, as these factors limit its strategic ambitions.

THE AUKUS AND THE QUAD AS FLEXIBLE PLATFORMS FOR COOPERATION WITH OTHER NATIONS

Beijing must also be wary of AUKUS and the Quad becoming platforms for deeper collaboration with additional members or for temporary and clearly defined, limited collaboration with other China-skeptical nations in the coming years. The Quad, though, seems the more likely format, as due to the membership of Japan and India, it is not a solely Western organization; an appropriate term, “Quad Plus”, has already been coined. Vietnam is a likely candidate. Despite Hanoi’s traditionally very balanced foreign policy and the pursuit of a hedging

⁴ A carrier strike group is a type of carrier battle group of the US navy. It is an operational formation composed of roughly 7,500 personnel, usually an aircraft carrier, at least one cruiser, a destroyer squadron of at least two destroyers or frigates, and a carrier air wing of 65 to 70 aircraft, plus one or two SSN.

strategy, it is reasonable to expect that Vietnam will utilize the Quad not only for collaboration in non-traditional but also in hard security matters (Panda, 2022). Traditionally, the “three nos” guide Vietnam’s foreign policy (no military alliances, no alignment with one country against another, and no foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory). The new “fourth no” in Hanoi’s foreign policy strategy (since 2019) enables the deepening of defense and security cooperation with other nations, even if it is almost openly directed against China. On the one hand, forward defense, i.e., preparing to cope with threats well ahead of time, is a concept not alien to Vietnam (Vuving, 2019: 388). On the other hand, deeper relations with the Western AUKUS seem too provoking and would, due to China’s assertive reaction, de facto undermine Vietnam’s security. South Korea, under new president Yoon Suk-yeol, could be another Quad Plus candidate if bilateral relations with Japan improve considerably. In general, though, it cannot be expected that a majority of the Indo-Pacific nations will adopt a pure-bandwagoning strategy with the US against the PRC. Even if they are concerned about China’s true intentions and power potential, the governments do not fully trust the US either. For instance, they need to take into account the possible return of Donald Trump or of one of his die-hard and isolationist followers to power. This possibility is one more reason for them to avoid putting all their eggs in the American basket. Rather, they prefer a hedging strategy, seeking to benefit economically from China while cooperating in a selective manner on defense matters with the US. The overall objective is to refuse to make a strategic choice between one of the two superpowers in order to maintain strategic autonomy and avoid becoming dependent on one partner (Gerstl, 2022). The EU’s involvement in the AUKUS and the Quad will also remain limited – but so will its strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific in general, as long as Brussels is not able to deploy military means. Even though the EU has a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the need to find a consensus among the 27 members limits scope and ambition. Moreover, even though the EU members cooperate in defense and security matters, there is no strong EU military, only 18 battle groups with about 1,500 soldiers each. In fact, after Brexit, only France has the necessary naval capacity to conduct credible FONOPs in the South China Sea. Germany, the Netherlands, Italy or Spain could join France-led missions in the Indo-Pacific, either with their own vessels or with personnel on board of French ships. Coordination is essential to ensure that any European military presence will not follow a mostly national logic. In other important sectors, such as economic and infrastructure

cooperation, the EU can deepen its influence. A key mechanism will be the Global Gateway Initiative, introduced in December 2021. This ambitious infrastructure and connectivity scheme with a focus on high quality infrastructure (roads and railways, but also health, education, digital infrastructure, and clean energy) can at least partly compete with the BRI.

CONCLUSIONS

The establishment of the AUKUS has demonstrated that in the Indo-Pacific region, national security concerns still trump economic objectives, social issues, and concerns about climate change. This holds even truer after Russia's unprovoked and unjustified invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The only Indo-Pacific-wide security format, the ASEAN-led ARF, has still not developed mechanisms for preventive diplomacy and sanctions. This does not come as a surprise in a part of the world where the principles of sovereignty and consensual decision-making are strongly upheld. As a result, one can anticipate that the Indo-Pacific security architecture will soon consist of a broad network of bi- and minilateral security partnerships that can be pragmatically adjusted and expanded as needed. The formats of the AUKUS and, in particular, the Quad, will thereby become even stronger axes of cooperation on which these bilateral partnerships can be pragmatically and flexibly anchored. However, neither the AUKUS nor the Quad is likely to transform into an Asian NATO. For this, the mutual distrust among the governments in the Indo-Pacific remains too strong in the foreseeable future. Yet, pragmatic defense and security cooperation among various Indo-Pacific nations, which is more or less openly directed against China, is a strong possibility. Unlike the US, China does not follow a policy of forming alliances. Instead, it is probable that the PRC will deepen its bilateral partnerships with Russia and Pakistan. However, the close cooperation with Vladimir Putin's unpredictable regime is likely to raise increasing concerns in China itself. To conclude, China's isolation in the Indo-Pacific security architecture is caused not only by Western strategies and the security pact AUKUS but also by its own policies, its assertiveness in the South China Sea, its confrontational stance towards Taiwan, and its partnerships with problematic regimes.

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