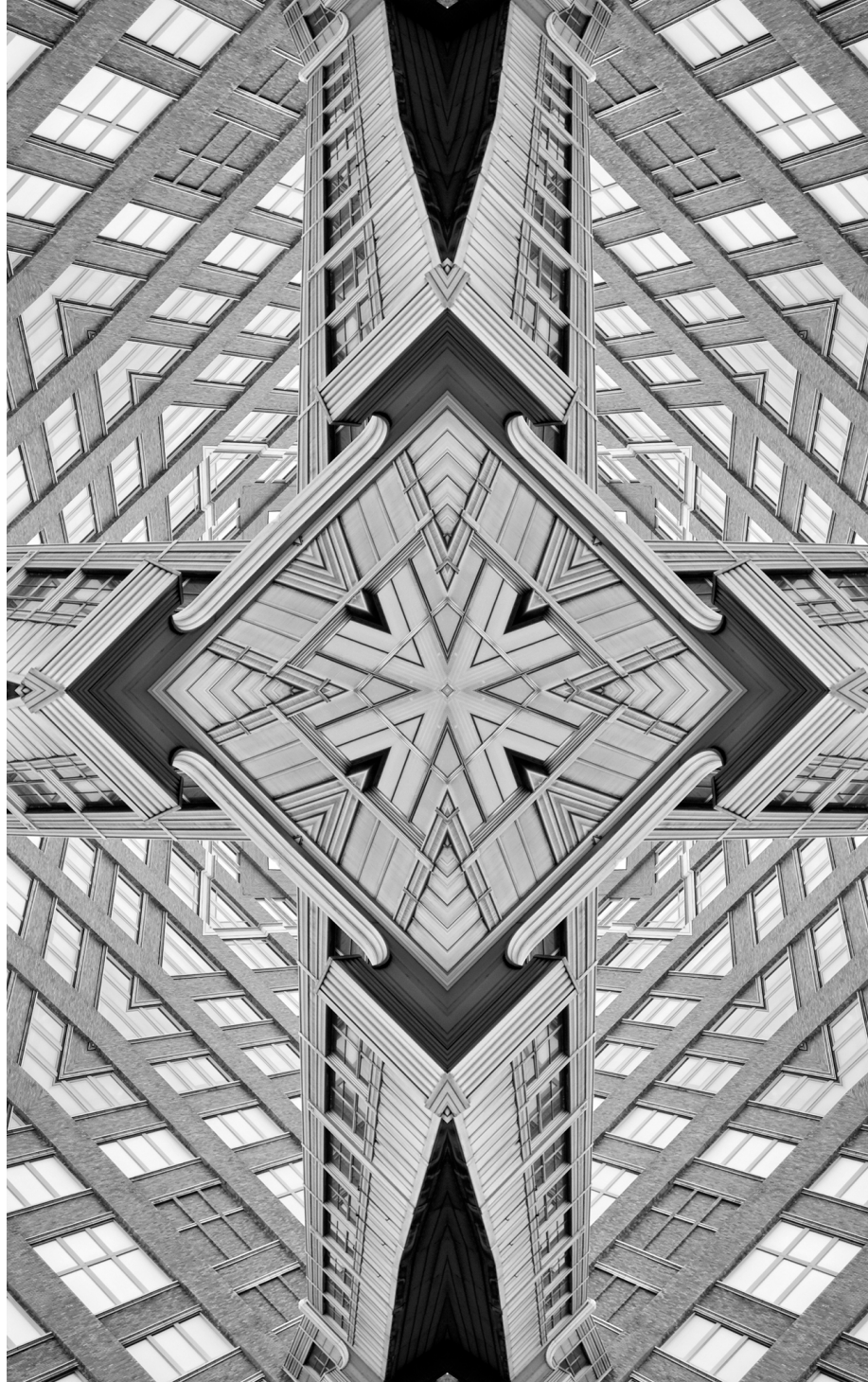


Issue

Brief

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AUKUS and the Eastern Indo-Pacific's Evolving Security Architecture

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Abstract

The formation of AUKUS (a security alliance between Australia, the UK, and the US) and its likely forward momentum in the near- and medium-term is certain to redefine the security architecture in the eastern Indo-Pacific region. Given the twin objectives of maintaining the balance of power and ensuring deterrence against China, several new initiatives and defence agreements between the member countries are on the anvil. The interface of AUKUS with existing US alliance and partnership arrangements in the region, coordination with other regional frameworks including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, and responses from China, Russia and other key players will be central to the trajectory—and consequences—of the grouping's evolution.

The evolving narrative on the Indo-Pacific region witnessed a major development in September 2021 with the formation of AUKUS, a security and defence arrangement between Australia, the UK, and the US. The brief joint statement announcing its creation¹ indicated that AUKUS is strictly for the Indo-Pacific region and will focus on information and technology sharing, defence capabilities, and strengthening related industrial bases and supply chains. The tripartite agreement also aims to share sensitive nuclear submarine technology with Australia and jointly strengthen capabilities in key areas like cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and the undersea domain.

The announcement of the new security grouping received considerable attention and discussion over three crucial aspects—its objectives and structure; the potential impact on the emerging geostrategic environment in the Indo-Pacific; and the plausible trajectory of cooperation, competition, and rivalry between the big powers. Political reactions (or the lack thereof) and commentary have indicated varied assessments of the grouping’s likely effects—from strengthening stability through deterrence, to disturbing the fragile security environment in the region through a new-age Cold War and exacerbating the arms race and bloc politics.

In the weeks following the announcement, much of the debate was centred on the new submarine deal with Australia. This was also linked to the cancellation of the US\$66 billion deal between Australia and France’s Naval Group for modified Barracuda class conventional submarines.² The new submarine deal led to a major controversy between the AUKUS countries and France, casting a shadow on French ties with the US, Australia and the UK, and on the US’s relations with the European Union (EU).³ It also heightened the EU’s apprehensions of the US abandoning Europe, thereby propelling the ongoing European ‘strategic autonomy’ narrative.⁴

AUKUS symbolises Australia and the UK’s strategic choice for long-term security alignment with the US in the Indo-Pacific region. Discussions among the AUKUS members were kept confidential in the run-up to the announcement, which came as a surprise to most officials, experts, and observers in different countries. Nevertheless, the grouping has taken shape at a startling pace because: the US has been keen to elevate willing middle powers to balance

China; Australia-China relations have deteriorated significantly since 2017; and the UK is seeking to reposition itself post-Brexit, globally and in the Indo-Pacific.⁵

AUKUS is not a collective security agreement like NATO or the Warsaw Pact. However, it is a non-treaty based informal alliance that exhorts security cooperation and mutual military support among the participating countries against an assertive China. More clarity on its structure and functioning may emerge in the coming months, which will enable deeper assessments of AUKUS's likely future. Given what is known in the public domain, this brief attempts a preliminary assessment of AUKUS's prospects for evolution as a security alliance in the eastern Indo-Pacific region.

“AUKUS symbolises Australia and the UK's strategic choice for long-term security alignment with the US in the Indo-Pacific region.”

Security Alliances in the Eastern Indo-Pacific Region

Alliances vary in their form of collaboration and commitment, level of institutionalisation, and the nature of functions they perform.⁶ In the post-Second World War period, the US pursued formal military alliances around the world to contain communism and the Soviet threat. While alliances in Europe, Southeast Asia and the South Pacific were multilateral, those in East Asia (with the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan) were bilateral. The US preference for bilateralism in East Asia was driven primarily by the desire for enhanced control over these allies.⁷ Of the current regional alliances in the Asia-Pacific region (see Table 1), the US's bilateral alliances with Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and the Philippines continue to be relevant in the region's new security architecture.

Table 1:
Regional Alliances in the Asia-Pacific Region

Year	Alliance	Objective	Status
1951	Mutual Defence Treaty (the Philippines and the US)	Mutual defence in case of an external attack	In force
1951	Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty	Collective security: an attack on one is a common threat to all	Split in 1984, now exists as bilateral alliance between Australia and the US, and Australia and New Zealand
1953	Mutual Defence Treaty (South Korea and the US)	Mutual defence in case of an external attack; stationing US armed forces in consultation with South Korea	In force

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Year	Alliance	Objective	Status
1954	US-Thai Defence Alliance (Thailand and the US; evolved from the Manila Pact -1954, the Rusk-Thanat communique-1962, and the Joint Vision statement-2020)	To meet common dangers, along with US security commitments	In force
1960 (revised from the 1951 treaty)	Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security (Japan and the US)	Mutual cooperation and security: defending each other in case of attack; the presence of US military bases and personnel in Japan	In force
1961	Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty (China and North Korea)	Mutual aid and cooperation, friendship; oppose attack on either state	In force
1954	South-East Asia Treaty Organization (Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the UK, and the US)	Collective defence	Disbanded (1977)
1971	The Five Power Defence Arrangements (Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the UK)	Immediate consultation in the event or threat of an armed attack on any member	In force
1979	Taiwan Relations Act (Taiwan and the US)	Enabling Taiwan to maintain adequate self-defence capabilities	In force

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The Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty was signed in 1951, with separate arrangements between Australia and the US and Australia and New Zealand for cooperation on military matters and common threats. The treaty has effectively been dormant for a long period, in part due to the New Zealand's nuclear-free zone policy, but has not been formally discontinued. Indeed, AUKUS may be seen as an attempt to pursue an action-oriented agenda by omitting New Zealand and including the UK.

The South-East Asia Treaty Organization, institutionalised through the Manila Pact in 1954 (with a mix of regional and external powers), was disbanded in 1977 due to internal disagreements and a lack of cohesion on military issues. The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA)—a non-US consultative defence and security mechanism between Australia, New Zealand, the UK, Malaysia, and Singapore—marked its 50th anniversary in November 2021. Over the years, it has attempted to stay relevant by adapting to the member-countries' common perception of changing security threats. The member-countries continue to highlight the relevance and utility of FPDA, but the arrangement may face challenges due to China's condemnation of AUKUS and concerns raised by Indonesia.⁸

The formation of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994, and the gradual re-emergence of great-power competition in the first decade of the current century led to several policy adaptations by regional and extra-regional powers. Several dialogues and partnerships began to evolve to ensure the continued balance of power and a stable security framework in the eastern Indo-Pacific region. In recent years, the US has focused on strengthening existing military alliances and security partnerships in the region, in addition to forging new relationships, to ensure that its military maintains its competitive edge with respect to China. In December 2021, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, "Threats are evolving; our security approach has to evolve with them. To do that, we will lean on our greatest strength: our alliances and partnerships..... It's about reinforcing our strengths..."⁹

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Of the multiple alliance and defence arrangements in the eastern Indo-Pacific region, AUKUS is oriented towards the China challenge as perceived by the US. Given this focus, AUKUS's two main, albeit tacit, objectives can be surmised to be maintaining the effective balance of power with China in the Indo-Pacific region, and ensuring credible deterrence against China.

Indeed, the unclassified text of the 2021 US Department of Defense Annual Report on China to the US Congress states that “the PRC’s [People’s Republic of China’s] strategy aims to achieve ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ by 2049 to match or surpass U.S. global influence and power, displace U.S. alliances and security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region, and revise the international order to be more advantageous to Beijing’s authoritarian system and national interests.”¹⁰ It also noted that China is attempting for its armed forces to have a more proactive role in promoting its strategic agenda. Military modernisation is being supported by larger defence budgets and initiatives such as ‘Made in China 2025’, ‘China Standards 2035’, and the ‘Military-Civil Fusion’ development strategy. The US report stresses that the People’s Liberation Army is rapidly enhancing its abilities to “fight and win wars” against a “strong enemy”, coerce Taiwan and rival claimants in territorial disputes, counter an intervention by a third party in a conflict along China’s periphery, and project power globally.¹¹

In line with these assessments, AUKUS is the beginning of a new phase in the US’s changing posture in the region.¹² The new US Indo-Pacific Strategy released in February 2022 notes the mounting challenge from China and highlights its objective as “building a balance of influence” in the Indo-Pacific region.¹³ It emphasises the role of “alliances and partnerships” and seeks to modernise and adapt them. Notably, the strategy document includes repeated mention of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) but only a brief reference to AUKUS. This downplaying of AUKUS in the new Indo-Pacific strategy could perhaps be due to the concerns raised by some partners.¹⁴ However, despite the very brief reference in the US’s strategy, the evolution of AUKUS will likely continue at a steady pace along these lines:

- **New Arrangements/Agreements within AUKUS**

Since AUKUS has started as a semi-formal alliance without delineating a charter and functional architecture, its evolution is likely to be a bottom-

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up process. The UK's Integrated Review of Security, Development and Foreign Policy released in March 2021 states that the country aims to be “deeply engaged in the Indo-Pacific” by 2030 and that it “will enhance China-facing capabilities...to respond to the “systemic challenge it poses to our security, prosperity and values.”¹⁵ Australia has also adopted a stronger posture against China. Formal agreements between the US, UK and Australia are thus likely to be finalised under the AUKUS banner in key areas of defence cooperation expounded in the joint statement. The agreements will certainly be tailored with a specific focus on China, with a suitable mechanism to coordinate and monitor implementation. Through such agreements and arrangements, both at the strategic and operational levels, AUKUS will be positioned as a credible hard-power bulwark against China.

- **Promoting Complementarities with the Quad**

Among the new formal partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region, the Quad has been the most significant. The Quad's vision, outlined at the maiden summit held in March 2021,¹⁶ recognises each member-country's peculiarities in their approach to the Indo-Pacific region, and seeks to build upon the areas of convergence vis-à-vis an assertive and aggressive China.¹⁷ The September 2021 follow-up summit built upon the vision of broad-based objectives,¹⁸ focusing on development-linked initiatives for the common good and cooperative security.

While the Quad and AUKUS both seek to address common security challenges, the means and approach that will likely be employed differ, with AUKUS focused almost exclusively on ‘hard power’. With the US and Australia being members of both groupings and with the expectation of enhanced cohesion among the Quad members, the evolution of AUKUS will also seek to strengthen complementarities between them. These may take the shape of cooperation in intelligence sharing, partnerships in technologies with military relevance, reorienting value chains of defence industrial bases, collaboration in the space and cyber domains, and working together on emerging technologies with military applications. There will be an increased emphasis on the importance of both groupings to address concerns related to the Quad's role due to higher level defence cooperation between the AUKUS members.

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- **Co-existence with Other Visions, Strategies and Mechanisms**

The AUKUS joint statement mentions that the grouping will seek “to work with like-minded allies and partners to protect shared values and promote security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.”¹⁹ This may be a difficult proposition, given that the broad vision for the Indo-Pacific outlined by some groupings and countries is at variance with that of AUKUS. These include the EU and France, whose emphasis has been on strategic autonomy and multilateralism.²⁰ AUKUS’s creation has thus served to stress the divergence in the strategic agenda for the Indo-Pacific between the Anglosphere and the rest of Europe.²¹ It also differs from the vision outlined in the ASEAN’s Outlook for the Indo-Pacific, which stresses ASEAN centrality as the underlying principle for promoting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, with ASEAN-led mechanisms as platforms for dialogue and implementation of Indo-Pacific cooperation.²² While AUKUS underlines the commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, it seeks to seize the initiative, thereby endangering the idea of ASEAN centrality.²³ Although there has been no official comment from ASEAN,²⁴ its ability to maintain the status quo will be tested in the coming months and years.²⁵

India has consistently conveyed its convergence with the vision and outlook of the EU, ASEAN, and France, and may thus need to balance its approach with competing visions.²⁶ Indeed, opinion in India is divided on the likely consequences of AUKUS.²⁷ Other observers in the Indo-Pacific region have also highlighted that AUKUS is western-dominated, and unlike the Quad, it has no Asian participation.²⁸ Consequently, the evolution of AUKUS is likely to be linked to stressing complementarities with other visions and strategies, while allaying apprehensions. This will likely be a gradual process in its movement towards a formal alliance. On the other hand, Japan may find it easier to adapt its vision and strategy for the Indo-Pacific to the new reality of AUKUS and may lend increased support to the grouping in the near-term. The accommodation between AUKUS and other existing structures in the eastern Indo-Pacific region are likely to pose challenges, wherein the role of the Quad will find increased salience towards regional integration.

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- **Sustaining Competitive Edge with Focus on Maritime Dimension**

In the short- to medium-term, AUKUS may continue as an informal alliance but new initiatives may be seen at the operational level. It may become the framework for a new US naval posture in the region, with the support of Australia and the UK, and through revitalised alliance arrangements with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines.²⁹ The US defence department plans to integrate AUKUS with the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI), an Indo-Pacific-focused fund created under the National Defense Authorization Act in 2021. The PDI features budgetary requests to bolster deterrence and maintain a competitive edge vis-à-vis China and includes a small component for security cooperation with allies and partners. The initial budgetary request by the defence department under the PDI was US\$5.1 billion (which has since been revised by the US Congress) to cover a range of operational capabilities, with US\$3.9 billion (nearly 80 percent) earmarked for the navy.³⁰

The US has also been considering setting up a standing naval force for the Western Pacific and to commence a named operation. This has been linked to a classified report submitted by a defence department task force set up by US President Joe Biden in February 2021 to “win the competition of the future with China”.³¹ Two standing naval forces have been activated in the past by NATO—Standing Naval Force Atlantic in January 1968, now known as Standing NATO Maritime Group 1; and Standing Naval Force Mediterranean in 1992, now called the Standing NATO Maritime Group 2. The two groups comprise between two to six warships from the different NATO countries, and have been part of various operations, focused on threats like terrorism, piracy, illicit trade and trafficking, and supporting humanitarian missions. As part of the US’s Operation Enduring Freedom in the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks, a multinational naval taskforce, the Combined Task Force 150, was formed under the Combined Maritime Forces to conduct naval security operations. As such, it is possible that a naval task force for the Western Pacific region may be formed under AUKUS, with the appropriate model/nomenclature, and participation of the US, Australia and the UK based on respective capacities to provide resources.

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The new submarine deal with Australia has a strong linkage to the US's deterrence strategy regarding China, and could also facilitate visits and the homeporting of US nuclear submarines to Australia. Facilities related to nuclear safety, maintenance, and training may be planned in Australia in parallel with those for construction, integration, and trials. However, key elements of this plan are yet to evolve, as the trilateral submarine project is expected to have an 18-month planning phase, with the first Australian nuclear-powered submarine only likely to be ready in about 15 years. The 1958 UK-US Mutual Defence Agreement includes a clause on the exchange of technical expertise on nuclear submarines, and Australia's inclusion is being facilitated through a new agreement signed in December 2021.³² In March 2022, Australia unveiled plans for a new base for nuclear submarines on its east coast, at an estimated cost of US\$10 billion, to enable the transition over the next 20 years.³³ The option of leasing a nuclear-powered submarine in the interim—given the attendant benefits at the operational, support, maintenance and training levels—is also on the table.

In addition to nuclear-powered submarines, the AUKUS countries are likely to work together to enhance in-theatre capabilities, with attendant basing and logistic arrangements.

“AUKUS's evolution will be determined by its two main objectives: maintaining the effective balance of power with China in the Indo-Pacific region, and ensuring credible deterrence against China.”

Chinese Reactions and Responses to AUKUS

China's initial reaction to the announcement of AUKUS was along expected lines. On 16 September 2021, just one day after AUKUS was announced, editorials in Chinese newspapers criticised the move. The state-run *China Daily* wrote, "The Quad, Five Eyes (Intelligence sharing network between the US, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK), and AUKUS are likely to work in tandem," and recommended that "Washington should discard ideological bias, Cold War mentality, and return to multilateralism."³⁴ The *Global Times* stated that "the US is hysterically polarizing the alliance system", and that by tilting towards the US, Australia has "turned itself into an adversary of China.....and is still a running dog of the US." It also categorically threatened that Australia will be punished by China if it oversteps in supporting the US.³⁵

The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, has said that AUKUS "undermined regional peace and stability, intensified the arms race and undermined international non-proliferation efforts."³⁶ Additionally, Chinese Foreign Minister and State Councilor Wang Yi said the country sees AUKUS causing "five harms to the region": (1) triggering the risk of nuclear proliferation, (2) inducing a new round of arms race, (3) undermining regional prosperity and stability, (4) sabotaging the building of a nuclear-free zone in Southeast Asia, and (5) leading to the resurgence of the Cold War mentality.³⁷

However, beyond such statements, China has responded moderately and pragmatically.³⁸ It recognises that AUKUS is meant to limit China's rapid arms buildup and military modernisation towards the goal of becoming a "world-class" military power by 2035 and to fight and win wars against a strong adversary by 2049.³⁹ China and Russia conducted their first joint naval patrols in the Pacific in October 2021, and the Chinese defence ministry stated that these exercises will "further develop the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the new era, enhance the joint action capabilities, and jointly maintain international and regional strategic stability."⁴⁰ China perceives its partnership with Russia and their combined military strength as a counterbalance to AUKUS in the Western Pacific.⁴¹ In the build-up to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, China and Russia issued a joint statement on 4 February 2022,⁴² emphasising their "no limits" partnership and stressing that regional security cannot be achieved by expanding military blocs and alliances. Beijing and Moscow are sure to increase

Chinese Reactions and Responses to AUKUS


their opposition to AUKUS on the grounds that it will be a replication of US and NATO approaches in Eastern Europe, with similar negative consequences. China also criticised the AUKUS countries' plans to cooperate on hypersonic and counter-hypersonic systems (announced in April 2022), adding that the US is using the Ukraine war to deepen cooperation between NATO countries and the US alliances in Asia.⁴³

If China continues to strengthen its military at the envisioned pace, AUKUS will likely respond through suitable initiatives. This may include the increased stationing of US troops, equipment, platforms, and weapons in Australia⁴⁴ with British support, along with strengthening the alliance network with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. Further, if AUKUS is seen to have a limiting impact on China's coercive capabilities and actions, its evolution will likely be accorded a higher priority.

“While China has responded moderately and pragmatically to AUKUS thus far, it recognises that the grouping is meant to limit its rapid arms buildup and military modernisation plans.”

The formation of AUKUS as an informal security alliance is a major development, and its impact on the geopolitical environment and security architecture in the eastern Indo-Pacific region is likely to be significant.

AUKUS is a key step to complement formal US alliances, partnerships, and dialogues in the western Pacific region. It seeks to maintain the effective balance of power and ensure credible deterrence against China. New defence agreements between the three partner countries, with a focus on China, are likely in the near-term. The framework is expected to follow a bottom-up approach, while attempting to strengthen complementarities with the Quad. Additionally, new initiatives are likely to be introduced at the operational level to maintain a competitive edge over China. Given that AUKUS's broad vision is at variance with that of the other key players in the Indo-Pacific region, such as the EU (particularly France) and ASEAN, attempts will be made to allay apprehensions about its trajectory. Notably, the emergence of new defence partnerships between Beijing and Moscow, and China's continued rapid military modernisation will also impact AUKUS's evolution.

AUKUS is likely to continue as an informal alliance in the near term, even as it looks to build on synergies with the existing alliance arrangements with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. Stability may be the declared objective of all regional and external players, but heightened security competition in the eastern Indo-Pacific can be expected. It is crucial for the AUKUS countries to undertake measures to deal with the twin challenges of restraining an assertive and coercive China, and preventing the adverse consequences of a potential bipolar competition in the eastern Indo-Pacific region. 

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