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## **AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific: Stakeholders Weigh their Wins and Losses**

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# Introduction

The trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS), announced on 15 September 2021, has instantly become a matter of interest, and controversy, in the Indo-Pacific, the region that is unfolding as a theatre for 21st century's geopolitical affairs. Touted as Canberra's biggest defence partnership in decades, the trilateral aims to strengthen the security arrangement in the Indo-Pacific along with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or the Quad.<sup>1</sup> This was made clear in their joint statement, which described the pact as a "historic opportunity for the three nations, with like-minded allies and partners, to protect shared values and promote security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region."<sup>2</sup>

What AUKUS primarily does is enable Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines with assistance from the US and UK, and diversify its cooperation in cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technology, and undersea capabilities. It is an extraordinary move, in fact, for the US and UK to commit to exporting nuclear technology to a non-nuclear powered nation such as Australia. In November 2021, AUKUS members also signed the naval nuclear propulsion information agreement that allows sharing of sensitive information to improve their mutual defence postures.

For the US, this alliance will allow it to expand its sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific region. As President Joe Biden has said, this pact "is about investing in our greatest source of strength, our alliances and updating them to better meet the threats of today and tomorrow."<sup>3</sup>

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Indeed, maintaining the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific is of utmost priority for Washington especially at a time of China's belligerence, including towards Taiwan. Therefore, the US is willing to work with its allies in the region to enhance their defence potential through sharing of sensitive defence technology. Similarly, for Britain, strengthening its traditional ties with Australia and the US is an effective way of gaining a greater voice in the region. British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace declared that with China "embarking on one of the biggest military spends in history" and "engaged in some disputed areas", the UK's regional partners "want to be able to stand their own ground."<sup>4</sup> From an Indian standpoint, meanwhile, AUKUS is highly important as it allows the country to be more ambitious in its foreign policy and defence approaches and gives it greater strategic room to manoeuvre in the Indo-Pacific. To be sure, however, some quarters have expressed concerns that AUKUS could end up marginalising the Quad.

Along with the interest is some controversy, as AUKUS has reignited the diplomatic tensions between certain global powers. France, for one, recalled its ambassadors from Washington and Canberra for the first time in 243 years. Even the European Union (EU) expressed dissatisfaction with Australia's decision to abandon its ties with France. The Australia–EU Free Trade talks—long

planned—have been postponed, and analysts assume that it is in retaliation for the cancellation of the French-Australian submarine deal worth €56 billion. AUKUS has also widened the divide in the trans-Atlantic relationship between the US and Europe, especially after Washington's unilateral decision to pull its troops out of Afghanistan without consulting its European allies.

Some hostility has also come the way of AUKUS from China. Beijing has said that the agreement was "extremely irresponsible" and accused the member states of initiating an "arms race" in the Indo-Pacific. Other countries in the region have responded differently. Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan, and the Philippines, have welcomed the trilateral partnership, whereas Indonesia and Malaysia have voiced concerns over the potential presence of a nuclear-powered weapon in their waters. At the same time, Indonesia is seeking to boost its defence capabilities amidst ongoing tensions with China in the South China Sea. It is negotiating a deal with France for the sale of 36 Rafale fighter jets which would allow Paris to increase its security footprint in the region as a compensatory measure after the cancellation of the France–Australia submarine deal.

In this Special Report, ORF scholars examine AUKUS from five perspectives: Australian, American, British, French, and Indian. The aim is to obtain a thorough understanding of the trilateral security arrangement and explore the role it will play in the Indo-Pacific region. From strengthening Washington's Pacific anchor, to reigniting the Global Britain Brand and strengthening Australia's strategic ambitions, AUKUS can have diverse impacts on not only the three participating members but also other regional powers. While India has displayed solidarity with its Quad partners against rising tensions with China, France has sought to look elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific to bolster its 2018 Indo-Pacific Strategy especially after the AUKUS rift, leaving the French and the Europeans to ponder their strategic autonomy.

The announcement of AUKUS has thrown the challenges in the Indo-Pacific in sharp relief as like-minded nations attempt to find an adequate response to the strategic churn in the region. With regional powers trying to evolve partnerships that will see closer alignment of regional policies and actions as well as greater integration of their defence forces, challenges are also likely to emerge which will need careful assessment and consideration. The debate on AUKUS has only just begun; even at its nascence, however, the trilateral can already have long-lasting impacts on the strategic map of the Indo-Pacific.

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# The View from the American Beltway

Vivek Mishra

The long-term deal between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS) is important for Washington for various reasons. For the first time in 50 years, the US is sharing its submarine technology with other countries; it had previously only shared nuclear propulsion technology with Britain in 1958.<sup>1</sup> The trilateral security agreement covers a broad spectrum of partnerships including the sharing of information and technology in a number of areas such as intelligence and quantum technology, as well as the acquisition of cruise missiles.<sup>2</sup> Its first major initiative will be the delivery of a nuclear-powered submarine fleet for Australia. Over two decades, the agreement will see broad collaborations between the three nations in the areas of science and technology, industries, and defence forces. In the first 18 months, the three countries will undertake consultations to devise mechanisms that will ensure compliance with commitments to nuclear non-proliferation.<sup>3</sup>

## Shifting US Priorities in Asia

The AUKUS deal augments Canberra's strong alliance with the US. To begin with, it came on the heels of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan which happened in August 2021. As the troop withdrawal, and the subsequent fall of Kabul to the Taliban, caused the US a loss of credibility regarding its role in regional security, the AUKUS deal sought to fill the strategic vacuum in America's long-sought 'Pivot to Asia' strategy. The deal marks a power shift—<sup>4</sup> a reorganisation of US priorities in Asia, while strengthening Washington's Pacific anchor which was undermined in the Trump era. The AUKUS deal is also being projected as the Biden administration's step to reassure its Pacific allies about American presence and security guarantee.

## Regional Security in the Indo-Pacific

The AUKUS deal seeks to address core US concerns of regional security, deterrence, and balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. As the leaders of Australia, UK and the US signed the agreement, they all acknowledged that regional security has significantly grown as a common concern. In their joint statement issued on 15 September 2021, the three heads of state pledged to “defend our shared interests in the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>5</sup> It reflects the US’s strong commitment to the security of the Indo-Pacific region within the mandate of the AUKUS. At the operational level, AUKUS seeks to attain strategic deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region by deploying nuclear-powered submarines. These submarines have a clear technical edge over conventional submarines—their carrying and submersible capacities, as well as speed, has the potential to asymmetrically alter regional strategic balance quickly one way or the other.

At present, the US has a total of 68 nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines and nuclear-powered attack submarines, compared to 29 of Russia, China’s 12, the UK’s 11, France’s 8, and one of India.<sup>6</sup> Australia’s access to this technology will make it only the 7<sup>th</sup> country to possess it. In a potential one-upmanship scenario in the Indo-Pacific, nuclear-powered submarines can offset Beijing’s advantages if more Australian, British

and American submarines can be deployed in the Indo-Pacific waters within a short period of time, especially as China has yet to develop robust anti-submarine capabilities.

While the strategic intent of the AUKUS agreement is not explicitly stated, most indications point to Beijing. After all, China dominates as a predominant concern within the expansive umbrella of strategic resurgence that the US seeks in the Indo-Pacific. From a balance-of-power position, the US reckons its partnership with Australia, perhaps among all its Pacific allies, as the most potent for external balancing vis-à-vis China along with other partners, with possible strategic expansions in their surface and under-sea capabilities in the future. To be sure, the US’s other allies like Japan and South Korea face their own external and internal limitations. The AUKUS agreement lays down clearly that it will seek external balancing in the Indo-Pacific region, outlining its specific aim of “working hand in glove to preserve security and stability in the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>7</sup> External balancing is expected to bolster existing US alliance in the Indo-Pacific and could prove useful as a measure of assuring security through combined opposition against Beijing.

In this strategy, Australia could prove to be the most critical strategic outpost in the Pacific theatre for the US. Assisting Canberra in augmenting its defence capabilities could be a useful strategy to ameliorate the impact of a rapidly closing US-China power gap. Politically, Australia's recent firm posturing vis-à-vis China<sup>8</sup> has created a regional bulwark in the Pacific for Washington; to this, the AUKUS deal adds a security layer and strengthens external balancing in the region. Besides reassuring its partners, the AUKUS deal will look to repair the US's hub-and-spoke system of alliance which has sustained its partnerships in the Pacific theatre at least since the end of the Second World War. In the long run, a stronger Pacific alliance will allow the US to depend more on burden-sharing between partners and allies in the Indo-Pacific.

Despite the fact that Washington has juxtaposed AUKUS to its growing network of partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region—including ANZUS, ASEAN, Five Eyes and the Quad,<sup>a</sup> the former distinguishes itself from the others. For instance, between AUKUS and the Quad, the US has ruled out the idea of adding India or Japan to the new trilateral security partnership.<sup>9</sup> This decision is reflective of two important things: first, that AUKUS is purposefully intended to be strategically

anchored in the Pacific theatre; and second, AUKUS could complement the Quad with its differentiated regional and security focus. The AUKUS's purpose can also be assessed as complementing that of the Quad, even as the strategic and security focus of the former can be kept as distinct from the broad mix of agendas of the Quad. This provides the member countries a spectrum of available manoeuvres.

Essentially, AUKUS seeks to complete the loop that attempts to rebalance the US strategic positioning to the Asia-Pacific. Furthermore, the agreement reinforces the US's commitment to the Indo-Pacific, potentially enhancing its relevance in the region. It promises to augment the US's partnerships in the region, increase coordination and cooperation, and even provide abilities to cause counter-disruptions in the Indo-Pacific region in the future. Finally, in the emerging competitive geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, the two most pertinent aspects that would keep the core regional interests of the US in the region hinged to AUKUS will be regional stability and arms race.

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a The ANZUS Pact is a formal Pacific security treaty between Australia, New Zealand, and the United States that was signed in San Francisco on September 1, 1951. ASEAN or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, is an economic union comprising 10 member states in Southeast Asia. The Five Eyes partnership is an intelligence alliance comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Quad or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is a group of four countries: the United States, Australia, India, and Japan for furthering broad cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and ensuring security and stability in the region.

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# A Fit with the UK's 'Global Britain' Goals

Rahul Kamath

The Indo-Pacific region continues to attract regional and non-regional powers as it unfolds into a key geopolitical arena. The signing of the AUKUS pact in September adds another dimension to the security architecture in the region; with AUKUS, Australia's regional prowess combines with the technical expertise of the UK and the US in what can only be described as an amplification of regional security. The deal immediately resulted in some diplomatic wrangling, especially between France and the European Union (EU) as the former recalled its ambassadors from Canberra and the US—a first in their 243-year-long association. France did not, however, recall its ambassador from London; it views the UK as playing only second-fiddle to the US. Paris refers to

London as a “permanent opportunist”, stressing on London's junior status vis-à-vis the US. Nonetheless, the government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson considers AUKUS as a milestone, especially following Brexit and since it outlined its new Indo-Pacific strategy in March 2021.<sup>1</sup>

Since Brexit, PM Johnson has been attempting to once again hoist the banner of “Global Britain” and claim for the UK a greater stake in the international community. Johnson has remarked that the success of Global Britain would depend on the security of the homeland, and the stability of the Euro-Atlantic area while expanding its vision eastwards.<sup>2</sup>

The British Indian Ocean Territories constitute a keystone for the UK in the Indo-Pacific: Diego Garcia is leased to the US; and Duqm port in Oman receives aircraft carriers in a critical geostrategic location near the chokepoint of the Gulf of Oman, between Oman and Iran. The UK also opened its naval support facility in Bahrain in 2018—its first permanent base since withdrawing from the Suez Canal in the 1970s. The UK has only begun to understand the importance of the region in recent years; after all, it was embroiled in contentious domestic affairs, primary of which was the Brexit negotiations.

Following Brexit, the UK has initiated engagements with the Indo-Pacific, a region accounting for almost half of global economic output. The former UK foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, in his visit to India in 2020 said, “If you look at India and the Indo-Pacific region and take a long-term view, that is where the growth opportunities will be.”<sup>3</sup> The UK is seeking global leadership and increased prosperity since its departure from the EU as it aims to have a meaningful security role in the region, guided by Washington. The UK recognises China as a systemic competitor and aims to work through regional multilateral organisations to counter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific, especially in the South China Sea and the Taiwanese waters. PM Johnson has hinted at expanding G7 into G10 by inviting three Indo-Pacific powers—i.e., South Korea, India, and Australia.

In other words, the region is a canvas for the UK in its effort to balance military engagement and economic and strategic partnerships with like-minded democracies in the region to achieve significant outcomes. The AUKUS’s establishment, for the UK, could translate to high-skilled job creation<sup>4</sup> and the preservation of global stability. Reacting to hostile remarks from French officials following the AUKUS signing, Johnson was quoted to have said, “I just think it’s time for some of our dearest friends around the world to *Prenez un grip* (get a grip) about this and *Donnez moi un break* (give me a break).”<sup>5</sup> The UK on multiple occasions has accused France of overreacting. At the same time, Johnson is aiming to sign a new *entente cordiale* (cordial agreement) with France. The rupture in mutual trust is significant as these powers fight for position in the world’s fastest-growing region.

At the same time, the EU is also trying to achieve consensus on establishing a European Strategic Autonomy and France will aim to coordinate with other Indo-Pacific powers to not only protect its EEZs but also sustain in the region to effectively compete with China.

The promises made by the Boris administration during the Brexit negotiations relied heavily on expanding the country's role beyond its territorial confines; the UK's inclusion in the Pacific security pact could partly realise these promises. The UK's *Integrated Review*, which is its blueprint for Global Britain published in March 2021, refers to the Indo-Pacific region 30 times.<sup>6</sup> The document asserts the country's position in the Indo-Pacific by declaring ambitions to establish the most integrated presence of any European nation in the Indo-Pacific. The document also focuses on rebuilding ties with allies by elevating the status of the UK's special relationship with the US, followed by aligning with Australia.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, however, AUKUS does not fully extend the idea of "Global Britain" as there is no military element and Britain's defence investments and deployments have remained fairly within European territory. Downing Street seeks to emphasise on restoring the lost glory of NATO against the backdrop of EU's Strategic Autonomy.<sup>8</sup>

The UK further seeks to expand its role in the Five Eyes, an intelligence alliance between Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the US, besides training the Australian military in new nuclear submarine technology. The UK is expected

to deploy the Rolls Royce nuclear reactor to power the submarines and provide quiet pump-jet propulsion. This could result in job creation in the UK. The AUKUS trio aim to expand beyond nuclear sub as they develop joint technologies to protect the undersea cables by incorporating the use of artificial intelligence and quantum communication. The AUKUS countries have signed a Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement, which allows for the exchange of sensitive information and formalises Australia's access to highly sensitive nuclear submarine technology. AUKUS situates seamlessly in the UK's Defence Command Paper and Integrated Review as an integral and strategic part of the idea of Global Britain. London has promised to increase the British defence budget by 10 percent in this decade to showcase their *Machtspolitik* (*Power politics*).<sup>9</sup> The dispatch of the new Royal Navy Carrier Strike Group (CSG21) to the Mediterranean and the Indo-Pacific in May 2021—the first operational deployment of the UK Carrier Strike Group since 2011—was not solely showboating; rather it was signalling the UK's tilt towards the region. AUKUS also fits in the UK's new Integrated Operating Concept (IOpC)<sup>10</sup> as it introduces two critical functions: engaging partners and constraining rivals through confrontation.

Therefore, for the UK, the AUKUS framework can have long-term, strategic impacts that in turn can revitalise Johnson's vision of "Global Britain". The next crucial challenge for the UK would be to normalise its relations with France and the EU, and develop a new transatlantic approach to the Indo-Pacific region to counter their common systemic rival. PM Johnson's aspirations to compete in the Indo-Pacific while tilting away from Europe and the EU could fail to achieve its objectives owing to the greater presence of stronger regional actors in the

Indo-Pacific. Still, the UK will continue to play a significant role as a significant security actor in the Indo-Pacific. Its intent to put more emphasis on Asia in its foreign policy would achieve its desired outcome only if the UK is more settled domestically and regionally.

“The promises made by the Boris administration during the Brexit negotiations relied heavily on expanding the country's role beyond its territorial confines; the UK's inclusion in AUKUS could partly realise these promises.”

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# Australia Ponders a Win

Premesha Saha

**B**y being part of AUKUS, Australia has made it clear that it is taking the side of the United States amidst growing Chinese belligerence in the Indo-Pacific region. A US government spokesperson has described AUKUS as “the biggest strategic step Australia has taken in generations.”<sup>1</sup> As the US and UK agree to share their nuclear-powered submarines technology with Australia,<sup>2</sup> the White House has noted, “These submarines will allow Australia to deploy for longer periods, are quieter, much more capable and will allow us to sustain and to improve deterrence across the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>3</sup> The AUKUS pact also covers enhancing joint capabilities, deeper military interoperability, “new architectures” of meetings and engagements between defence and foreign policy officials, and to “spur co-operation across many new and emerging arenas” – cyber, applied AI, quantum technologies and “some undersea capabilities.”<sup>4</sup>

Australia’s primary strategic concern has historically been the South Pacific and, to some extent, Southeast Asia in its extended neighbourhood. In recent years, however, Northeast Asia and the looming China threat has begun to have more influence on Australia’s strategic and security calculus. Australia is bandwagoning with the United States in conducting military operations in the Indo-Pacific, and undertaking strong measures and mechanisms to deter China’s aggression. On its surface, the AUKUS deal does aim to boost Australia’s defence capabilities; at the same time, some analysts are questioning whether it will serve Australia to rely on this arrangement.<sup>5</sup> Australia seems certain that the “United States will remain engaged in Asia for the long haul and will be prepared to face down China if necessary.”<sup>6</sup>

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a In 2019, the US, Russia and China formed the Troika on Afghanistan, which became the Extended Troika with the addition of Pakistan. The Moscow Format was set up in 2017 for talks among special representatives from Russia, Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Iran and India. The representatives of five Central Asian countries also attend its meetings. The US has also been invited to its consultation.

To be sure, the country's leaders had until recently been talking about having a more self-reliant defence posture. With this new security arrangement, however, it appears to be "betting big on the future of its alliance with the United States."<sup>7</sup> Some observers have also noted that Australia "has given up its strategic ambiguity and made itself a bigger target because of the pact."<sup>8</sup> There is speculation that Australia could face more economic retaliations from China, which is its biggest trading partner.<sup>9</sup>

There is little doubt that AUKUS is a watershed for Australia: It is a big step for a country who had walked away from the 2007 Quadrilateral grouping to avoid irking Chinese sentiments. It remains to be seen whether this strategy undertaken by Australia, and primarily the United States, with a view to deterring China from using force in the Indo-Pacific region will work or only provoke China to act more aggressively in disputed areas like the South China Sea and the East China Sea.

Even before the AUKUS pact, however, Australia has already been taking steps that were hinting at a shift in its China policy. For example, it has barred the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei from competing in its 5G infrastructure market, and it has introduced legislation to curb foreign interference in politics. It also cancelled the projects that had been agreed to under China's flagship Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>10</sup>

Immediately following the AUKUS signing, it became clear that the new arrangement will have an impact on Australia's relations with other countries, including France and countries in Southeast Asia. To begin with, the lead-up to the security pact was unknown to other countries in the region, and since then has generated anxiety among the Pacific Island countries. Australia's Secretary of Defence, Greg Moriarty, has said his government would be reaching out to the members of the Pacific Islands Forum to assure them that "the growth of Australian capabilities [will contribute] to regional stability."<sup>11</sup>

AUKUS has created a similar backlash in the ASEAN, with Indonesia and Malaysia being most categorical in expressing their reservations. Malaysia has expressed concern that the pact "can act as a catalyst for arms race."<sup>12</sup>

For Australia's former Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, it was "potentially deceitful" that France was not told about the new trilateral deal.<sup>13</sup> The repercussions, Turnbull said, were not confined only domestically or even within the European Union, but also extended into other neighbouring countries.

Australia will likely derive benefits from the AUKUS agreement to make itself a formidable defence power. At the same time, it will need to work on strengthening its partnerships in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, and also with France which is a notable player in the region. These same geographies have

been the pillars in Australian foreign policy, and Australia would need to dig deep in its diplomatic arsenal to involve these countries in discussions revolving around security and convince them that AUKUS would help restore a peaceful and rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

“AUKUS is a big step for a country who had walked away from the 2007 Quad to avoid irking Chinese sentiments.”

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# France's Unease in Sharp Relief

Andrea Moreschi

The termination of the 56-billion-euro submarine procurement contract between Australia and France, and the related announcement of the AUKUS defence alliance between Canberra, Washington, and London, have understandably been perceived as a grave diplomatic affront in Paris. The response was harsh, with French Foreign Minister Le Drian accusing the Anglo-Saxon alliance of “duplicity” and of behaviour not suited to long-standing and trustworthy allies.<sup>1</sup> Words were swiftly followed by actions, as French President Emmanuel Macron recalled his ambassadors to Australia and the United States back to Paris—a historic first.<sup>2</sup> In part, France’s reaction can be read as having been motivated by diplomatic humiliation and exclusion, especially because Paris was completely blindsided by Australia’s decision. Considering that President Macron, who is up for re-election in Spring 2022, has endeavoured a great deal to restore France’s global standing and prestige, the snub must have been particularly hard to swallow, and therefore required a firm reaction. It would,

however, be dangerously short-sighted to simply ascribe the backlash to a president’s bruised ego, as some commentators have hastened to do.<sup>3</sup> There are, indeed, several layers to the French perspective, which can only be understood if one acknowledges the complex constellation of interests and long-term goals that Paris has been pursuing in the Indo-Pacific.

Fundamental to France’s advancement of its strategic objectives is the defence industry; the AUKUS pact hurts it. To be sure, the submarine deal was an ideal win-win situation for France: Australia, a close and trusted allied, was to expand its military capabilities, while the French defence industry was to increase its revenues and technical expertise. However, when Canberra pulled out of the agreement, Naval Group, which had been chosen as the contractor in the 2016 deal, lost an estimated 10 percent of its annual revenue and incurred other costs, mostly associated with the ad-hoc establishment of an Australian subsidiary.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the reputational damage suffered by Naval Group can create ripple effects throughout France's global efforts. Indeed, the submarine procurement deal represented an important piece in the expansionary strategy in the Indo-Pacific defence market, which includes ongoing contracts with India, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia.<sup>5</sup> In the words of Naval Group President Pierre Éric Pommellet, the deal "was not just a programme, it was a transformation for the company, we were projecting Naval Group into a new world [...] It was a transformation for France also."<sup>6</sup>

The most immediate reason for such an increase in the involvement of Paris in matters of regional security and defence is that France is an Indo-Pacific power. With almost 3 million citizens residing in its overseas departments and territories, as well as its 9 million sq km of exclusive economic zones, France has more substantial and direct stakes in the future of the region than the United Kingdom or the United States could ever claim.<sup>7</sup> In order to defend its interests, Paris maintains a significant military presence between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans: between 7,000 to 8,000 military personnel, 15 warships, and 38 aircrafts.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the announcement of AUKUS, and the subsequent increment in the military activities of its three members in the Indo-Pacific, is seen as a destabilising presence in the region. Additionally, it has been taken as a sign that Washington and Canberra are not really committed to the kind of

multilateral security-building that France has been promoting through, for instance, multinational training exercises with regional players, such as India and Japan.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, at a deeper level and beyond transitory bouts of pride, the AUKUS rift is about the emergence of two increasingly contrasting visions for the future of defence and security in the Indo-Pacific. The triangular alliance has been explicitly conceived in opposition to China's growing influence in the region, and it is therefore bound to reinforce the arbitrary power duality between Beijing and Washington. In other words, the Anglo-Saxon solution, from the point of view of France, is one that perpetuates the existence of a bipolar order in the Indo-Pacific and therefore exacerbates the risk of conflict in the medium to long term. This precise point is explicitly addressed in the French Strategy for the Indo-Pacific, which states: "Chinese-American strategic competition [...], giving priority to bilateral arrangements and power relations in order to favour their own national interests, contributes to the breakdown of the international order."<sup>10</sup> In contrast, France has been pursuing a strategy of geopolitical mitigation, by weaving a web of inclusive, multilateral diplomatic initiatives with regional powers that are equally invested in preserving stability and peace.

For instance, President Macron has invested time and energy into strategic convergence with India, with which the country has signed a military procurement deal worth 7.9 billion euros for the purchase of fighter jets.<sup>11</sup> Another important partner has been ASEAN, which in 2020 signed a strategic partnership deal with the European Union and most of whose members favour a non-confrontational approach to China.<sup>12</sup> Australia itself had been identified as a key contributor to the actualisation of France’s plans in the Indo-Pacific, to the point that President Macron chose Sydney as a location for the announcement of the French Indo-Pacific Strategy in 2018.<sup>13</sup> That came after the two countries had signed an agreement for enhanced intelligence sharing, a comprehensive Strategic Partnership, and a Vision Statement on the Australia-France relationship.<sup>14</sup>

It should therefore appear clear why France reacted strongly to the announcement of AUKUS. From the point of view of France, the pact reveals a fundamental discrepancy between the strategic vision that the Anglosphere intends to promote in the Indo-Pacific—one that is framed in terms of competition and containment—and that of France which is “multipolar, stable, and inclusive”.<sup>15</sup> AUKUS is certainly a challenge, but it also bears some unique opportunities. Namely, as the French government was quick to point out, it helps make the case for the need to build a global defence initiative that is qualitatively different, strategic, autonomous, and truly European.<sup>16</sup> The AUKUS rift is therefore likely to have an impact on how the French and the Europeans think of their own security and of the security of their own interests in the long run.

“There is a fundamental discrepancy between the Indo-Pacific vision of the Anglosphere—one of competition—and France’s, which is inclusive.”

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# A Divided Opinion in India

Abhijit Singh

**T**he jury in New Delhi is still out on AUKUS, the new security pact between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Eight weeks after it was announced, the issue continues to split political observers in India, with little clarity over whether the agreement benefits New Delhi or is detrimental to its interests.<sup>1</sup> Many believe the pact is good for India and its Indo-Pacific partners.<sup>2</sup> By clearly declaring its intention to deter China, proponents say AUKUS offers New Delhi vital ‘leverage’ in dealing with Beijing.<sup>3</sup>

As some see it, the continuing turbulence on India’s northern border, makes it imperative for New Delhi to avoid joining an anti-China alliance.<sup>4</sup> The pact, they aver, allows India—a key US partner and Quad member—the freedom to set the terms of engagement with its neighbour, without formally participating in a China-containment initiative. In a post-Covid-19 era, New Delhi also needs to

prioritise challenges in the non-military domain: vaccine diplomacy, infrastructure building, technology sharing, and climate change.<sup>5</sup> Proponents say the pact allows New Delhi to focus on a developmental agenda, with a degree of assurance that that the strategic threat in the Indo Pacific is being robustly met.<sup>6</sup>

The sceptics disagree.<sup>7</sup> They say that however noble its intended purpose, AUKUS undermines the strategic order in Asia. First, it is plainly provocative to China, and has the potential to destabilise the Western Pacific (with inevitable consequences for Indian Ocean states).<sup>8</sup> AUKUS can accelerate an undersea arms race that is already underway, and could paradoxically tip the balance against America and its allies in Asia.<sup>9</sup> Second, the agreement is prejudicial to French interests, serving only to alienate Paris, injecting distrust in the Western alliance. This, too, could have unintended strategic consequences.

From a maritime operations perspective, AUKUS gives many Indian experts pause. With the Indian navy's conventional underwater capability fast shrinking, the possibility of Australian submarines in the Indian Ocean is not reassuring for India's security observers.<sup>10</sup> While they are happy for Australia — a Quad member and close partner of India in the Indo Pacific — to receive nuclear submarine technology from the US and the UK, Indian analysts are apprehensive of the possibility of a future increase in friendly nuclear attack submarines (SSNs/submersible ship nuclear) in the Eastern Indian Ocean. Such a scenario could erode India's regional pre-eminence in the Indian Ocean.<sup>11</sup>

Of greater concern for Indian observers is the possibility that provoked by AUKUS, China might respond—not so much in the congested South China Sea, already gridlocked with posturing and counter posturing—but in the Indian Ocean, where China has so far been relatively quiet. AUKUS could push China into assuming a more adventurous posture by deploying more warships and submarines in the Eastern Indian Ocean. Chinese naval ships could well stay clear of Indian waters, but their mere presence in the littorals is likely to put pressure on the Indian navy. In response, New Delhi might have to consider deploying warships in the Western Pacific, which could further aggravate tensions. AUKUS, critics say, could push India-China maritime dynamics into a negative spiral.

The possibility of Chinese aggressiveness in the Indian Ocean is not merely hypothetical. In recent months, China's military and non-military activity in the IOR, has prompted the Indian navy to embark on a plan to develop a fleet of nuclear attack submarines. Ironically, the US has made no offer of help.<sup>12</sup> The “very rare” nature of AUKUS – as announced by US officials immediately after the unveiling of the pact – leaves little to imagination.<sup>13</sup> Washington does not anticipate technology sharing on nuclear submarines with any partners other than the UK and Australia.

While it has rarely received submarine technology from the US, New Delhi has been accepting of American discretion on the matter. India has instead relied on Russia for nuclear submarine technology, including in the construction of the reactor of India's first SSBN/submersible ship ballistic missile nuclear (Arihant) and in the acquisition (on lease) of a nuclear attack submarine. With the Indian Navy's announcement of an indigenous SSN programme, however, there is a need for a nuclear reactor more powerful than the one installed in the Arihant (a non-war-fighting platform). Following the deepening of Quad ties, some in India were hopeful that the US would consider providing the Indian Navy with nuclear submarine propulsion technology. AUKUS gives many Indian experts pause.<sup>14</sup>

And yet, AUKUS goes well beyond the nuclear submarines.<sup>15</sup> The pact's ultimate goal is to prevail in the technology competition with China. Pooling resources and integrating defence and industrial supply chains is a way for the US, Australia, and the UK to beat China in the high-tech race for regional and global supremacy.<sup>16</sup> As AUKUS partners expand cooperation in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and cyber operations, the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific could shift in ways New Delhi and other regional capitals have not entirely accounted for.

All of this would still be acceptable if the new alliance were to complement the Quad. Many believe it does.<sup>17</sup> There is something about AUKUS, however, that suggests it diminishes the value and usefulness of the Quad.<sup>18</sup> Since its revival in 2017, the Quad has displayed strategic flexibility in dealing with China. The grouping's allure is its mystique—the ability to drive non-traditional cooperation, and yet pose a strategic counter to China in the maritime domain. AUKUS, critics say, has taken some of that element away. The Quad has been shown to be a non-military, non-security grouping with agency in shaping the strategic narrative of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>19</sup> The new alliance of the US, UK and Australia has seized the initiative.<sup>20</sup>

For the moment, Indian officials are being careful in articulating a formal position vis-à-vis AUKUS. On the eve of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the United States for the first in-person Quad summit in September, Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla stated that the deal was “neither relevant to the Quad nor likely to have any impact on its functioning.”<sup>21</sup> This suggests an attempt to downplay the significance of AUKUS for India.<sup>22</sup>

For India, however, the imperative is to display solidarity with its Quad partners, especially at a time when tensions with China are again rising. The official narrative is that the new pact adds one more lever in efforts to balance China. Yet concerns in India's security establishment vis-à-vis AUKUS are real. Despite an acknowledgement of Canberra's strategic motivations to bolster strategic deterrence against China, there is a palpable sense among security watchers that the new alliance impinges on Indian stakes in the Indian Ocean.<sup>ORF</sup>

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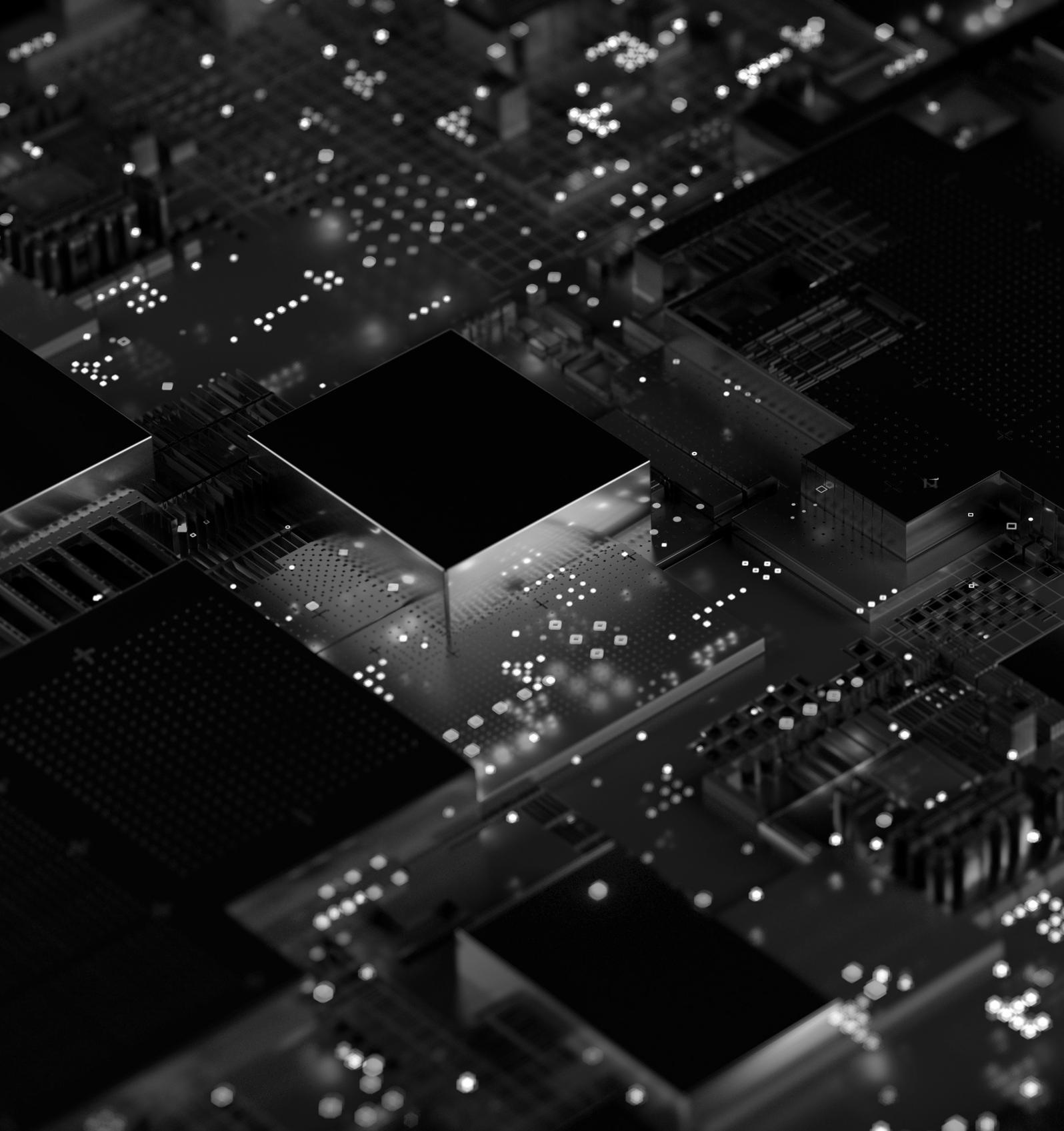
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