



# AUKUS Agreement has Strategic Significance for the Indo-Pacific, but what about India?

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A part of the reason that the US pulled out of Afghanistan was to focus on China. And we clearly see that with the Washington-Tokyo joint statement issued in April that included a direct reference to Taiwan and the recently unveiled AUKUS trilateral security partnership between Australia, US, and UK whose first agenda would be to deliver nuclear submarines to Canberra.

The strategic significance of trilateral security cooperation between Australia, UK and US for the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines by Australia needs to be seen in the context of increasing tension in the region because of the Chinese aggressiveness and muscle-flexing coupled the use of coercive power to ensure support to its claims in the South China Sea (SCS). The long-term objective for this agreement was stated by Biden: “We need to be able to address both the current strategic environment in the region and how it may evolve. Because

the future of each of our nations-indeed the world-depends on a free and open Indo-Pacific enduring and flourishing ahead”.

Thus, it is clear that the US is back to deploying smart strategy along with its allies to counterbalance China instead of the rather naïve ‘America First’ policy adopted by the previous Trump administration. For, China today presents a systemic challenge for the US. And it can only be countered through systemic approaches with allies. This also creates options for ASEAN nations like Vietnam which are economically reliant on China. After all, ASEAN is central to Southeast Asia. But China has been weaponizing economic interdependencies with regional nations. In other words, ASEAN nations don’t have a problem with economic relations with China. But when these relations are leveraged by Beijing to press its aggressive maritime and territorial claims in the South China Sea, it becomes a problem.

Briefly, the deal will over the next 18 months equip Australia with nuclear propulsion technology, which the United States has so far shared only with the United Kingdom. It would enable Australia to deploy nuclear powered submarines for its defence in the Indo-Pacific. These submarines would be only armed with conventional weapons and not nuclear weapons. It was also made clear by the leaders of three countries that it is not against any country, though it is obvious that it emerged from mud created by the Chinese belligerence.

Its strategic implication for the entire Indo-Pacific needs to be seen in view of Chinese aggressiveness and the need for its stability for common good. While it is true that Quad is not a military alliance, it does envisage that negative trends in the region should be countered to have peace and stability in the region. All the Quad members are having bilateral relations with the countries in the region to build their defence capabilities. The Japan-Vietnam agreement is the latest example in this respect. India is also trying to build the defence capabilities of several nations and is having joint naval exercises. The current deal can be seen as an effort by the UK and US to strengthen the defence capabilities of Australia. The nuclear-powered submarines are needed in the region for maintenance of peace in the region. One important dimension reflected by this deal is that the US and UK are now strongly committed to having free, open, resilient and inclusive Indo-Pacific. This should dispel the perception that the US is unreliable

or is withdrawing from domestic issues. The US has committed to be in the Indo-Pacific region. The Chinese expansionist approach and its muscle flexing require robust defence capabilities of the nations in the region. The Chinese coercive approach works because smaller nations do not have capabilities to match the power of China.

Blinken, the US Secretary of State responding to the concerns of the Chinese economic pressure against Australia to weaken the alliance, stated that this ensures that the United States and Australia now have “an unwavering alliance”. The leaders of the three countries said the alliance will help to ensure peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. While the AUKUS is not connected with the Quad, its objectives are the same as that of the latter. Both desire peace and stability in the region and are opposed to the aggressiveness of China. This is the fact though in both the documents China does not figure mainly due to the unwillingness of the ASEAN countries to be seen as against China, which are central to the Indo-Pacific vision. While the Joint Statement of the Quad pointed out the “shared vision for the free and open Indo-Pacific” and the commitment to “strive for a region that is free, open, inclusive, healthy, anchored by democratic values, and unconstrained by coercion”, the main objective of the AUKUS is also the peace and stability of the region. But there is a difference between the two. The Quad is mainly an instrument of dealing with diplomatic and political dimensions involving all the four and there is a possibility of its extension with other powers joining it, the AUKUS is defence pact to build the capabilities of Australia. It can be placed in the same category as the bilateral defence agreements of other nations in the region with the same objective.

A strong Australia can significantly contain the devious moves of China in the region. The Quad countries have been consistent in supporting the principle of freedom of navigation and flight in accordance with the UNCLOS. This pact indicates not only the resolve of the US to be in this region but also ensures that Australia would not hesitate in defending its interests even at the cost of annoying China. So far Australia had been hesitating in opposing China mainly because of its economic dependence on the latter. It joined exercises with the US, Japan and India earlier and then withdrew from it. However, since last year its relations with China have been deteriorating and it was looking to counter the Chinese aggressiveness. The implication of this pact

is that now Australia is more firmly aligned with the Quad. Australia and the United States have also entered into new agreements on the force device. Mr Dutton said after the meeting that there would be greater air cooperation between the two countries through rotational deployments of all types of US military aircraft to Australia.

Australia's overall strategy also should be seen in this context. On the 11th September in the 2 plus 2 meeting with India, Australia reaffirmed the commitment to supporting a strong, resilient and inclusive regional architecture, with ASEAN at its centre. It also reiterated commitment to maintaining a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific region to support the freedom of navigation, over-flight and peaceful and unimpeded commerce by adherence of all nations to international law including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and peaceful resolution of disputes. It also emphasized that the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea should be fully consistent with international law. It also agreed to enhance supply chain resilience and to work together through multilateral, regional and plurilateral mechanisms to strengthen and diversify supply chains for critical health, technology and other goods and services. These objectives suggest that Australia is now determined to contain China.

The Chinese reactions were on expected lines. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said the deal was "extremely irresponsible" and "narrow-minded" and denounced "the outdated Cold War mentality". China has to understand that the era of cold war is over. At that time there were two centres of power. Today the international order is based on multilateralism. Any power trying to destroy the strategic balance would be opposed by other nations which may form mini-lateral alliances for specific purposes, but all would oppose the destroyer of peace and tranquillity. The growing opposition to China is because of its unwillingness to follow international norms and laws.

Overall, the AUKUS is likely to have a beneficial impact in the region. A strong Australia with robust military links with the US and UK would deter China from misadventure in the region. This template may be used to build the defence capabilities of other nations in the region that would go a long way to contain the Chinese expansionist policy and thereby bring stability and peace in the region.

## Lessons for India

The surprise at the formation of AUKUS is for a number of reasons. Firstly, the three nations are already allied to each other, in more ways than one — the US and UK are NATO allies, and Australia, New Zealand and the US are linked by the ANZUS pact. All three are also members of the “Five Eyes” intelligence alliance. Secondly, this announcement, coming just days before the first in-person summit meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), places a question mark over the continuing relevance of this forum and its long-overdue actualisation. Finally, the inclusion of a much-diminished, post-Brexit UK in such a long-range alliance is bound to raise a few eyebrows.

China has made no secret of its neurosis about the Quad as well as the naval exercise, “Malabar,” both of which, now, have a common membership, comprising the US, India, Australia and Japan. Beijing’s apprehensions arise from the suspicion that this concatenation could be a precursor to “containment” – the Cold War strategy which eventually brought the USSR to its knees.

While frequently heaping scorn on their attempts at synergy and coordination, China loses no opportunity to send intimidatory messages to the Quad nations. This has led to palpable trepidation amongst members of this grouping, who have remained over-cautious in their utterances and tended to “tip-toe” around the “dragon” in their midst. The Quad has neither created a charter nor invested itself with any substance, fearing that it would be dubbed an “Asian NATO.” China, on its part, has dismissed the Quad as a “headline-grabbing idea which will dissipate like sea-foam”.

So far, China has had its way in the geopolitical arena without hindrance from any quarter. In the South China Sea, having staked outrageous territorial claims, and contemptuously dismissed the adverse verdict of the UN Court of Arbitration, China has proceeded to create artificial islands, and to convert them into fortified air bases. Regular “freedom of navigation operations” by the US and allied navies have neither deterred, nor daunted China.

Even more belligerent has been China’s conduct along the Sino-Indian border, where it has used massive military deployments to stake claims

to large tracts of Indian territory, leading to a sanguinary conflict in mid-June 2020. India, having counter-mobilised, at considerable economic cost, has stood its ground. Given our limited options, this dangerous confrontation is likely to continue.

Against this backdrop, it is possible that creation of the AUKUS could well be an attempt to send a stronger message to China. However, China's description of this alliance as an "exclusionary bloc," should be food for thought for two members of the Quad/Malabar forums — India and Japan — who have been excluded from the new grouping.

While uncharitable comments about "Anglo-Saxon solidarity" must be ignored, there may be substance in the belief that the "Anglosphere nations" — which share common cultural and historical ties to the UK — do inspire more confidence in each other. Whether the Quad and AUKUS will reinforce each other, or remain mutually exclusive, will, no doubt, become clear in the forthcoming Quad summit.

An issue that should give cause for reflection in New Delhi, arises from Biden's promise to transfer advanced technology, including submarine nuclear-propulsion to Australia. It brings into stark relief India's failure to acquire any significant high technology from the US, in spite of bilateral ties, which have steadily grown in warmth and closeness over the past decade and a half.

Some major milestones in the Indo-US security relationship have been: Signing of the pathbreaking Indo-US Civil Nuclear Agreement, in 2008; launching of the Defence Technology and Trade Initiative in 2012; accord of the status of "Major Defence Partner" by the US Congress in 2016; grant of Tier 1 status to India, enabling export of high-technology items; and institution of "2+2 talks" in 2018. Signing of the fourth and last of the key "foundational agreements" in 2020, was supposed to have eliminated the final impediment to closer defence cooperation.

"Our strategic partnership with India, a fellow democracy... is reaching new heights," says a 2019 US State Department document. While the warming of the Indo-US relationship brings comfort to Indians, we must beware of hyperbole, obscuring reality, in the bilateral discourse. American offers of help "to make India a great power" and overzealous

declarations (at the apex level in November 2017) that that “two of the world’s great democracies should also have the world’s two greatest militaries,” must be taken with a generous pinch of salt.

China, it is said, owes its pole position to the advanced technology it was given, or it purloined from the US over a 30-year period. All that India has to show for its “strategic partnership,” is approximately \$22 billion worth of military hardware purchased from US companies — a distinctly retrograde step when we seek *atmanirbharta* and freedom from external reliance. We need all the technologies being offered to Australia, in addition to “know-how” and “know-why” of much else, including stealth fighters, jet engines, advanced radars and, of course, nuclear propulsion for submarines as well as aircraft-carriers.

For India to attain its full potential, it will need insurance against hegemony, and a breathing space to restore its economy to its earlier buoyant trajectory. This respite will enable it to catch up with technology and boost its military muscle. While preparing to fight its own battles, India will need to seek external balancing. If realpolitik demands, it must break old shibboleths and strike new partnerships — wherever there is convergence of interests.

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