

AUKUS and new US Indo-Pacific strategic policy

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Abstract: *The situation in the Indo-Pacific region has escalated dramatically over the past decade by the tense relationship between the US and China. After withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, the United States shifted its focus from fighting terrorism to containing China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. In 2021, the US, the UK and Australia officially established a tripartite defense alliance called AUKUS, whose main goal is to strengthen their role in ensuring security in the Indo-Pacific. The Biden administration is addressing America's commitment to the region by strengthening alliances through AUKUS and other multilateral initiative.*

Keywords: AUKUS, Alliance, Strategic Policy, US, UK, Australia, Indo-Pacific, Russia, China

1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region has become the focus of the US “Pivot to Asia” since the Obama administration. When Donald Trump took power in 2017, he realized the Indo-Pacific strategy with such core values as independent sovereignty, peaceful settlement of disputes, free trade, and compliance with international law. Joe Biden, as the current US president, recognizes the urgency to ensure the region's long-term peace and stability in response to existing conflicts and circumstances. The Biden administration thus reinforces partnerships and emphasizes strengthening and building alliances. The introduction of AUKUS is viewed as a “historic step” and confirms further the US' new priorities in the Indo-Pacific region (Samaan, 2021).

2. The AUKUS alliance

The trilateral security pact AUKUS¹ was announced on 15 September 2021 by the US President Joe Biden, the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison. This initiative will help Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. Similarities in history, cultural and civilizational identity, ideology, law, and history in alliance relationships throughout the 20th and early 21st century are the prerequisites for expanding cooperation between these three countries. All parties are key members of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance (including also Canada and New Zealand), have bilateral defense

¹ An abbreviation drawn from letters that stand for Australia, United Kingdom, and United States.

cooperation mechanisms to back each other in international issues, and share common perspectives on international crises and conflicts. AUKUS targets comprehensive diplomatic cooperation, security and national defense, advanced science and technology, and defense-related industrial facilities and supply chains. In particular, it focuses on artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and undersea capabilities (White House, 2021).

Under the pact, the US and UK will share nuclear propulsion technology with Australia. Overall, the core mission of the AUKUS partnership is to balance power and promote security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. The birth of AUKUS basically comes from: (i) the goal of the Biden administration to forge alliances and strive to make the United States the world's leader; (ii) Australia's growing recognition of the threat posed by China; and (iii) the UK's claim to build itself a "big player" in the Indo-Pacific region as part of its "Global Britain" post-Brexit policy. Still, it is all about curbing China's growing military and economic influence (Niklas, Jagannath, 2021).

The establishment of AUKUS is expected to be a game changer in the Indo-Pacific region through the agreement by the US and UK to equip Australia with nuclear submarines, which will seriously weaken the Australia-China relations. In addition, the birthday of AUKUS coincided with the day the European Union (EU) announcing its strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, showing a lack of respect for the EU counterpart (Пажо́н, 2021). Although the alliance's central mission, to stabilize the Indo-Pacific region and countering new regional security challenges, does not emphasize the containment of China, the goal of increasing the presence of

its members in the region that has been under Beijing's long-standing influence is ultimately to contain China. This thus could be the beginning of a new Cold War underpinned by a large-scale arms race (Меньшиков, 2021).

However, according to Bordachev, AUKUS will not change anything, *Firstly* because the balance of power in the region is formed on the basis of the US and China military capabilities, with Russia's at time involvement, so it will not easy to change regional policy with limited resources. *Secondly*, AUKUS is a momentary phenomenon that reflects the behavior of modern states and is created to solve small-scale problems (Бордачѐв, 2021).

Yermakov notes that AUKUS is not just important from a geopolitical point of view, but the alliance's formation also serves to counter China and reinforce the US' most important allies, the UK and Australia. If the AUKUS plans are successfully implemented, it will accelerate the development of a nuclear submarine fleet in this long-time heated region (Черненко, 2021). Meanwhile, Litovkin believes the US, UK and Australia have formed an 'Indo-Pacific NATO' under the name of AUKUS. The alliance is not just simple and limited to a tripartite cooperation. It might expand to include as well India, Japan, and many other countries in the region. And its sole objective is to establish the US hegemony in the Indo Pacific (*Ren TV*, 2022). Sharing the same view, Artem Garin argues the expansion of AUKUS and the desire to militarize a common space could lead to tragic consequences for the humankind.

Particularly, the efforts from Canberra and Washington to define a war zone, evidenced by the creation of Australian Defence Space Command which has similar model of operation to the US Space Force, helps

to deal with growing threats in the joint military space (Антонова, 2022).

Given the worsening US-China relations, the US expansion of its cooperation forces countries in the region to consider their relations with Beijing, which could lead to regional instability and exacerbate the already tense situation, especially in the South China sea. AUKUS is a turning point as the international order has changed and countries will have to readjust their policies based on their national interests. Countries thus should hold conferences on how to behave in the new multipolar structural environment. Otherwise, each of them might recreate different alliances and behave roughly and security issues then will be difficult to manage (Mentor, Donat, 2021). Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov asserted that the unconditional imposition of a 'rules-based order', instead of complying with international law, would lead to serious consequences of re-establishing policies of the blocs and division between Western countries and other countries (Anjani and Novita, 2021).

3. The Biden administration's Indo-Pacific policy

AUKUS not only creates a platform for security and defense cooperation projects between the three countries, but also demonstrates a new level of commitment and close cohesion among its members. It shows the shift in the US Indo-Pacific strategy, a basis for the adjustment of its foreign policy in the region and in the context of the increasingly changing political environment. The US national interest in the Indo-Pacific region, through AUKUS, is to maintain security, in line with its policy to weaken China's influence. For the US, AUKUS helps connect allies and partners in a new way where geographical distance does not

prevent common interests between countries. Forming AUKUS is part of the plan to realize the US strategic goals, to set up a new power balance in the Indo-Pacific region, and becomes a 'new vehicle' for the US policies against China (Пажон, 2021). The introduction of AUKUS also serves to affirm that confronting China is an absolute priority of the Biden administration's foreign policy (Иванов, 2021).

While AUKUS supports its strategic and planned changes, it also leverages the US power to strengthen the expansion of global partnerships. AUKUS represents two important decisions in the US foreign policy: *first*, the balance of power in the US approach to the Indo-Pacific region; and *second*, its use of defense technology and allied cooperation to contain China (Zhu, 2021). The US has outlined areas of AUKUS cooperation where Australia will be provided with human resources to build its nuclear submarines, a new submarine base on the East Coast and a shipyard in South Australia. The pact also promotes cooperation in developing automatic undersea operating systems, planning for automated systems which are aided by artificial intelligence, modern hypersonic and anti-hypersonic weapons, and increasing cyber protection (REN TV, 2022).

The Biden government's decision to conclude a defense treaty with Australia and the UK has been factored by, first, China's rise and growing assertiveness, especially its military power and the US' weakening military presence in the region; and second the Biden administration's persistent reliance on international coalitions like AUKUS and the Quad¹,

¹ The Security Quadrilateral Dialogue (the Quad) is an informal strategic forum between India, the US, Japan, and Australia, maintained by semi-regular summits, information exchange information and military exercises between nations.

rather than on associated institutions like ASEAN, as an effective counterweight to China (Бордачева, 2021).

If the Quad presents a heterogeneous composition, with Japan and India having limitations in defense cooperation, AUKUS allows Washington to assemble a key group of allies to ensure common policies and better control of situations. The three countries have a long history of close cooperation, special interoperability and cohesion. AUKUS thus will become the new core for the US to contain China. AUKUS would make Australia a potential force for a nuclear attack in the event of a major power conflict, while Australia's nuclear submarines would help serve US military interests (Пажох, 2021).

With the ambition to restore its hegemony, the US cannot separate from Australia's goal of developing nuclear-powered submarines. The establishment of an industrial base for building and maintenance of nuclear-powered submarines in Australia will enable the US' more proactive support for Australia's submarine fleet. This can help the US relieve pressure on submarine building and maintenance bases, so the US is the most profitable country in the AUKUS tripartite alliance (Corben, Townshend, Patton, 2021).

As mentioned, the US vision for the Indo-Pacific region has to deal with how it will manage its alliances and partnerships. Competition with China is central to the Biden administration's national security policy (Harding, 2021). The most pressing problems on the international stage to the US have now been in Asia, as a result of China's rapid economic and military development and the world's real indicators and changes that challenge this great power. Therefore, in order to gain advantages in the region, especially

in the South China sea, the US focuses on economic, political and military cooperation activities. It can be said that the US-China conflict is the key internal contradiction of the current international politics (Алешин, 2021).

4. International responses

Countries have different responses to AUKUS. If Japan and India consider AUKUS as a deterrent against China in the Indo-Pacific region, Russia and China, on the contrary, criticize AUKUS for undermining regional peace and stability while increasing regional arms race. Some Southeast Asian countries have not made their position clear.

4.1. China

While many aspects of AUKUS are yet fully defined, China has already begun to respond to the new security agreement through government policy statements and announcements. China considers AUKUS to be revisionist in nature and a threat to regional security. Immediately after AUKUS was announced, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stressed that "relevant countries" should abandon the "Cold War zero-sum thinking" as well as "limited geopolitical concepts", because both are contrary to the policy of strengthening cooperation in the region¹. Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi said that AUKUS would create dangers, notably weakening the nuclear non-proliferation mechanism and increasing nuclear arms race. He also warned that efforts to promote common prosperity cooperation in the region will have to give

¹ See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2021), ["2021 年 9 月 16 日 外交部发言人赵立坚主持例行记者会"] ["Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on September 16, 2021"], https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/jzhs1_673025/t1907464.shtml, accessed on 8 June 2022.

way to factional competition¹. The China Youth Daily pointed to the change in the traditional political and security relationship between Western governments behind the alliance's "conspiracy and betrayal"². The Global Times even described the new alliance as reckless and self-defeating (Marc, 2021: 116).

Statements released by the Chinese government and media often refer AUKUS as an "Anglo-Saxon faction", indicating this alliance will only serve the interests of its three member countries, and so are the other US-led security initiatives, like the Quad and the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing pact. China is also seeking support from other countries in the Pacific Rim that are adversely impacted by the new alliance. In addition, Beijing stressed its commitment to regional cooperation by declaring its intention to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) only hours after the AUKUS agreement was confirmed. While Australia, the US and UK are trying to expand the scope of their alliance, China has made significant progress in increasing cooperation with the Solomon Islands. The development of their relations is seen as a blow to Australia because the Solomons are considered Australia's 'Northern shield', which is being broken by China.

At the same time, Beijing will use AUKUS as an excuse to justify its military actions, which will inevitably lead to increased security risks in the Indo-Pacific region.

This also means that China will probably step up its military activities in the 'gray zone' in the South China Sea to prevent the US-led military incursions. China will focus on developing its navy, improving coastal and offshore defense activities, and modernizing anti-submarine techniques in the region.

4.2. Japan

Japan always shows positive responses towards AUKUS, welcoming strengthened defense cooperation among AUKUS members, particularly if it disturbs China's strategy of growing into a regional power and a global dominator.

From the Tokyo's view, the presence of British and Australian nuclear submarines in the region will hinder China's pursuit of its agenda of expansion into the South China sea. Containing China, as Japan's philosophy, requires international commitments as many as possible, in order to restrict toxic acts. On the other hand, Japan believes the formation of multilateral cooperation and alliances will create certain difficulties and lower possibility of bilateral 'bullying' (Lars Vargö, 2021: 124-131).

4.3. India

India is a critical player in the regional geopolitics, being a special security partner of the US and a member of the Quad. India's responses to the AUKUS is understandably cautious. AUKUS strategically represents the US 'strategic reorientation'³ towards the Indo-Pacific region. Thus, as a security partner of the US, India would greatly benefit from this outlook and consider this new alliance a positive development for its security ambitions (Jagannath, 2021).

¹ Xinhua (2021), *AUKUS nuclear submarine deal brings five harms to region, says Chinese FM*, http://www.news.cn/english/2021-09/29/c_1310218200.htm, accessed on 8 June 2022.

² Chen Xiaoru (2021), "AUKUS": High-profile nuclear proliferation after conspiracy and betrayal", *China Youth Daily*, <https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/2021-09-23/dociktzqtyt7527144.shtml>, accessed on 10 June 2022.

³ Xem: Conley, Heather and Green, Michael (2021), "Don't underestimate the AUKUS rift with France", *Foreign Policy*, 22 September 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/22/aukusfrance-biden-europe-allies/>, accessed on 10 June 2022.

4.4. Russia

Russia has expressed its concern that this new form of cooperation could lead to a violation of the non-proliferation mechanism. The transfer of nuclear submarine technology to Australia by the nuclear powerhouses, the US and UK, could set a dangerous precedent and pave the way for the development of nuclear weapons by a nuclear-free country. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the new alliance would erode trust in long-standing institutions under the auspices of ASEAN (Папаронов, 2021).

4.5. ASEAN countries

The AUKUS-related challenges is believed to undermine the effectiveness of ASEAN-centric dialogue platforms. However, the ASEAN members always avoid expressing their position on this issue. Singapore and the Philippines hope that AUKUS will contribute to promoting peace and stability, supplementing security structures, and maintaining regional balance. Vietnam, given its strategic position in the region, also avoids counterbalancing AUKUS despite substantial enhancement of its military cooperation with the AUKUS members. Cambodia as a country that had experienced decades-long war and devastation wishes AUKUS would not fuel competition and further escalate tensions in the region (Папаронов, 2021).

There is a perception that the ultimate consequence brought about by AUKUS will be “felt” by all countries in the region once China decides to respond through policies or enlargement of its defense budget. As a result, any actions taken by partner countries can have an adverse effect, which will lead to the formation of more ‘alliances’ targeting development of defense technology and nuclear weapons. This is a threat not only to the Indo-Pacific region but globalwide (Jagannath, 2021).

5. Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific region is the key stage of strategic competition between China and the US. This region (predictably) will determine the future world order. The establishment of the AUKUS tripartite defense alliance and the transfer of nuclear technology to Australia demonstrate the great concern of the US against the regional situation. President Biden has emphasized the US foreign policy is not just in favor of the national interest, but on shared global challenges, joint efforts, and commitment to multilateralism and international leadership (Jones, 2021). AUKUS therefore can be considered a stepping stone in Biden’s policy approach to the Indo-Pacific region, demonstrating the US desire to create new security mechanisms in order to shape the US governance in the region □

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