



## FROM ALLIES TO AUKUS: THE NEW TRILATERAL DEFENSE PARTNERSHIP SHAKING UP THE INDO-PACIFIC

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### Unpacking AUKUS

On September 15, 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States declared the formation of the AUKUS trilateral security partnership to handle the three nations' common security concerns in the Indo-Pacific region. The partnership entails collaboration in several fields, such as intelligence sharing, technology, and military, including the transfer of nuclear submarines from the UK and the US to Australia. Today an “AUKUS row has broken out” after Australia's opposition leader and former Defense Minister claimed the country would no longer acquire British nuclear submarines, and instead would look to acquire those made in the United States. Now the US and Australia are intensifying efforts to speed up AUKUS's transfer of US technology exports to avoid ensnaring the AUKUS agreement and frustrating Australia's push for nuclear-powered submarines.

As a brief introduction to the AUKUS conundrum, the international community has reacted to the partnership news in both favorable and unfavorable ways from its onset. Supporters contend that the alliance will improve the security of all three nations and is a necessary response to the region's

increasing security challenges. They argue that the alliances already in place between the three nations will be strengthened by the collaboration, which will also advance regional stability.

Detractors, on the other hand, contend that the alliance might ratchet up hostilities in the area and raise new geopolitical concerns as the treaty aggravates the tense relations between China and the United States or brings longstanding enemies like Russia and China closer together. Concerns about the long-term effects of transferring nuclear submarine technology to a country without nuclear weapons have also been voiced by some specialists.

### Transforming the Indo-Pacific's Security Landscape

The AUKUS collaboration is important in many ways. First, it signifies a major change in the three nations' foreign policies, especially for Australia, which has historically relied on the US for security. Australia's increasing concerns about China's military assertiveness in the area and its economic pressure on Australia are reflected in this new partnership.

Second, AUKUS is important due to the cooperation it entails in regions that have typically been reserved for close allies. As part of the collaboration, the United States and the United Kingdom have agreed to give Australia access to nuclear submarine technology, greatly enhancing Australia's regional defense capabilities.

Thirdly, the AUKUS partnership emphasizes how crucial technological advancement is to determining the direction of defense and security in the future. To maintain a competitive advantage in the twenty-first century, the alliance includes collaboration in fields like artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and cyber capabilities.

### Securing the Seas: Analyzing Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific and Beyond

Maritime security depends on geopolitical events in the seas because they can impact freedom of movement, seaborne commerce, and sea lines of communication (SLOCs). Competition in the oceans between major and regional powers has a long history. From the balance of power during World Wars I and II, which compelled great and emerging powers to build formidable fleets to secure new economic resources, to the decline in maritime trade growth in recent years brought on by a weakened multilateral trading system and growing protectionism as a result of an escalation in US-China tensions since 2018.

AUKUS is no different. The evolving strategic competition in the area is one of the most pressing threats to the region's maritime security dynamics, but there are other threats as well. Important issues are also raised by the transfer of advanced technologies like nuclear submarines, cutting-edge artificial intelligence, cyber, quantum, and underwater equipment like drones and sensors.

- From a **diplomatic perspective**, we can discuss the threat of nuclear proliferation, a new arms race, undermining regional prosperity and security, sabotaging the creation of a nuclear-free zone in Southeast Asia, and, in the opinion of its critics, the resurgence of the Cold War mindset. The agreement briefly jeopardized long-standing relationships like the one between France, the US, and Australia, which raises similar concerns from AUKUS about the coherence of an American-led alliance system.
- From a **socio-political standpoint**, once Australia acquires nuclear-powered submarine capabilities, the maritime security dynamics in the APAC region may also face important risks. For instance, the emergence of the Quad grouping, bringing together the US, Japan,

Australia, and India could signal that there is an evolving will among other significant regional players to build stronger defense capability and cooperation against China as was suggested by the group's joint maritime operations in August and October of 2021 in the Philippine Sea and the Bay of Bengal, respectively. In the case of the already unstable situation in the South China Sea, a worst-case planning scenario could affect all three straits which would result in weeks of delay in the global supply chain.

- Finally, from the **security standpoint** the missile technology transfer under AUKUS poses a potential broadening of the risks of accidental war and a weakening of the Export Control Regime that currently deals with sensitive missile technologies (the MTCR).

Previous regional associations that had promised to the region's security by placing themselves at the center of the regional architecture through a complicated network of security institutions and ties are likewise struggling to stay relevant over the long run. ASEAN is one such organization.

AUKUS entails the provision of nuclear technology to Australia's navy by the United States and the United Kingdom for a new generation of attack submarines. This could, among other things, alter the balance of power in the region and, as a result, ASEAN's commitment to uphold and promote multilateral cooperation. The plan is based on three concepts that seem innocent enough: regional connection, freedom of navigation and overflight, and observance of international law. Its strength, though, is in highlighting the values China rejects. Most ASEAN members are marine nations and would accept these ideas wholeheartedly, but openly endorsing the U.S.-led policy would infuriate China. ASEAN has so far had difficulty adopting a unified stance out of concern for upsetting Beijing.

#### Resolving the AUKUS Divide: Seeking Common Ground?

Several nations in the region have had varying reactions to the AUKUS accord. China has perceived this development as a step to challenge their expanding influence in the area, including its territorial claims and military ambitions in the South China Sea.

The country expressed strong opposition to the pact, and concerns that it could lead to an escalation in tensions between China and the countries involved in the pact. China has accused the countries involved of interfering in China's internal affairs and undermining regional stability. There are concerns that the pact could lead to an escalation in tensions between China and the countries involved, particularly Australia, which has already faced economic retaliation from China in response to its support for an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19.

The move towards nuclear-powered submarines has also been seen as a significant development, as it could potentially give Australia an edge in naval capabilities and surveillance in the region which could further challenge China's strategic position.

AUKUS is likely to strengthen existing regional security alliances, including the Quad alliance which is seen as a counterweight to China's growing influence in the region. Hence, some experts have suggested that the pact could prompt China to further accelerate its military modernization efforts.

France, which had previously agreed to a €50 billion deal with Australia to provide conventional submarines, also expressed dismay over the abrupt end of the deal. With 1.65 million French residents living on islands like La Réunion, New Caledonia, Mayotte, and French Polynesia, the French also saw the Asia-Pacific region as being of crucial strategic and economic importance. Hence, AUKUS also contributed to a severe loss of confidence in France's relationships with important allies, highlighting the disparity in strategies for dealing with the Chinese challenge.

The partnership has also had implications for Russia, which has already expressed concerns about the partnership and accused the three countries of targeting China. Russia also sees the AUKUS partnership as a threat to its own security interests, which only led to increased deterioration in relations between Russia and the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia prior to the Ukraine conflict.

One potential area of concern for Russia now is the transfer of nuclear submarine technology to Australia. This represents a significant enhancement of Australia's defense capabilities and could potentially shift the balance of power in the region. Russia has long been wary of the United States' nuclear capabilities, and the transfer of this technology to a non-nuclear-weapon state like Australia has been seen as a provocative move.

The partnership's focus on technological innovation is a similar concern for Russia since the partnership includes collaboration in cyber capabilities which will be critical in maintaining a competitive edge in the 21st century. Russia is already a major player in the cyber domain and has perceived the AUKUS partnership as a threat to its own capabilities in this area.

Finally, the AUKUS partnership has represented a strengthening of the existing alliances between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This could encourage other countries to seek closer ties with these three countries, potentially leading to a realignment of global power dynamics which would have implications for Russia's own relationships with other countries, as well as its position in the global balance of power.

Overall, the AUKUS trilateral security partnership has significant implications for international relations, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. While it is primarily focused on addressing shared security challenges in this region, it is likely to have broader implications for global power dynamics.

#### Conclusion: A Complex Landscape of Challenges and Opportunities Ahead

Despite the potential for increased tensions, there are also potential avenues for cooperation between the nations affected.

China, for instance, has previously expressed interest in joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which includes Australia and Japan as members. This could provide a platform for China to engage with the countries involved in the AUKUS pact on issues such as trade and investment.

For France, which had previously signed a contract with Australia to supply conventional submarines, the termination of the contract in favor of the AUKUS pact has been a source of disappointment and frustration. However, there are also potential avenues for cooperation between France and the countries involved in the pact, particularly on issues such as counterterrorism and regional security.

Prior to its invasion of Ukraine, the AUKUS pact could have potentially created new opportunities for cooperation on issues such as arms control and regional security for Russia and the other concerned parties. This is because, while Russia had expressed concerns about the pact's potential to exacerbate tensions in the region, it also indicated a willingness to engage with the countries involved in the pact on issues of mutual concern.

Overall, the AUKUS pact represents a complex landscape of challenges and opportunities for countries in the region and beyond. While the pact has significant implications for regional power dynamics and strategic alliances, there are also potential avenues for cooperation.

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