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India and the AUKUS Pact: Pain or Gain for New Delhi

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In a virtual trilateral meeting of US President Joe Biden, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison on September 15, the three countries decided to establish a security partnership for the Indo-Pacific named AUKUS (Australia- United Kingdom-United States).¹ They have also announced that the partnership would help Canberra acquire nuclear-powered submarines, and Britain will provide Australia with the technology and capability to deploy nuclear-powered submarines. However, Australia will not be fielding nuclear weapons but using nuclear propulsion systems for the vessels, to guard against future threats.

After the AUKUS pact declaration, the Australian Prime Minister announced the scrapping of a contract signed in 2016 with French shipbuilder Naval Group to buy 12 conventional submarines worth \$40 billion to replace its more than two-decades-old Collins submarines. The nuclear submarines would be built in an Australian shipyard, making the Australian defence industry more robust.

The formation of the AUKUS has been received with caution by the regional countries, especially the Australian decision of having nuclear submarines. China strongly responded by saying that it is the resurrection of the cold war mentality in Asia and Australian decision is an "extremely irresponsible and double standard" act and Canberra may be a potential target of nuclear attack.² Southeast Asian countries, like Malaysia and Indonesia, have raised concerns about triggering a nuclear arms race in the region.

The objective of the AUKUS pact as well as the nuclear submarine deal is "to improve deterrence across the Indo-Pacific", amid rising concern of China's creeping assertiveness in the region, both diplomatically and militarily. For a long time, the US has been attempting to create a multilateral security partnership in the Indo-Pacific, outside the existing bilateral security partnerships with South Korea, Japan, and Australia. So far the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) formed by the US, India, Japan, and Australia has been the major security mechanism concerning the security of the Indo-Pacific, and the US is the main anchor of the Quad. Now, the US has set up another security mechanism, with its close defence partners, while two Quad members -India and Japan- are not part of it.

The region has witnessed quite a few trilateral or minilateral mechanisms such as Australia-India-Indonesia, Japan-US-India, Australia-India-Japan and US-Japan-Australia aimed at fostering security (maritime) cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. However, the significance of the AUKUS is that the member countries are ready to put strategic interest over economic interest, and are willing to jointly deploy military offensively for strategic purposes.

Since all the three are close defence partners and their security policies are closely allied with the US, the AUKUS will have more teeth to deal with China. The UK is keen to enhance its presence in the Indo-Pacific and has recently sent its aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth to the region, crossed the disputed South China Sea, and visited 40 nations, holding joint naval exercises with India, Japan, and South Korea.³ Australia had a good relationship with China due to their strong economic engagement, but that soured when Canberra decided to join the US in criticising China of its mismanagement at the early stages of the Covid pandemic. It irked China, which imposed a series of restrictions on imports from Australia.

In fact, the US wanted to build Quad as an effective counter mechanism against China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. When Japan announced the Quad in 2017, the US and Australia enthusiastically embraced it, while India has been a weak link. It has not progressed in a manner the US and its security partners have visualised. Any NATO kind of military contribution from the Quad is highly impossible because of the inherent policy constraints of Japan and India. Japan follows pacifism in its security policy while India's 'strategic autonomy' prohibits military alliances. Similarly, only the naval cooperation between the member countries is the strong pitch of the Quad. While AUKUS countries have no such inhibitions, from the Second World War onwards they have partnered in various military operations across the globe.

New Delhi's approach towards any regional mechanism concerning the security of the Indo-Pacific has been inclusive in nature that was explained by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Shangri La Dialogue in 2018.⁴ India is reluctant to become part of any security mechanism that is being touted as anti-China. Also, New Delhi was keen to expand the membership of the Quad, bringing some of the Southeast Asian countries into it, so that it would be more inclusive and will have wider representation.

The strength and sustenance of any security arrangement is based on how much economic dividend it provides through trade in arms and joint development of systems of common purpose. The Quad mechanism has never focused on this area, while AUKUS has taken off with a big-bang project.

India still would remain as a 'lynchpin' of US' Indo-Pacific strategy

Since India is the largest resident naval power in the Indian Ocean region, the US reliance on India to secure the Indian Ocean from the Chinese naval expansion would remain intact. Even though Australia and the UK are closely allied with the US, especially with Washington's China policy, they have their own limitations in confronting China. Even as the UK's aircraft carrier crossed the South China Sea, it

conspicuously avoided annoying China. Similarly, Australia comes within the range of China's ballistic missile attack and is not capable of defending its territory by itself. It would be difficult for the US to simultaneously protect its own interests and its partners' security.

On the other hand, the US strategy is to equip its allies and partners to stand by itself against the onslaught from China and the submarine deal is to enhance Australia's deterrence capability. Canberra is mulling to buy long range B-21 stealth bombers from the US, currently under development and expected to enter into service later this decade.⁵

Last year, Japan and the US agreed to build a new Japan specific fighter jet at the cost of about \$40 billion to replace its two decades old F-2.⁶ This is beyond its agreement with the US to purchase 105 F 35 (63 F-35As, 42s F-35Bs) with the total cost of \$23 billion. The new jet, named F-3, will be made in Japan based on home-grown design in which US' Lockheed Martin and Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries have partnered. Lockheed had proposed a hybrid design based on its F-35 and F-22 jets, but Japan rejected that in favour of a home-grown design.

In consonance with the 'strategic autonomy' policy, India must focus on the Mitsubishi-Lockheed Martin kind of technology partnership with the US to build advanced custom made systems for India to enhance New Delhi's own military preparedness to counter the Chinese threat. India can also replicate the AUKUS model, getting sophisticated technology from a third country facilitated by the US. **Similarly, the Quad cooperation needs to be strengthened by widening the areas of cooperation beyond the Malabar naval exercise, and include army and air force as well as space, cyber, and information warfare.**

Notes

¹ *Hindustan Times*, "AUKUS: UK, US and Australia launch pact to counter China", September 16, 2021. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/us-uk-and-australia-launch-indo-pacific-pact-101631768286344.html>

² *Global Times*, "Nuke sub deal could make Australia 'potential nuclear war target'", September 16, 2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1234460.shtml>

³ Bonnie Girard, "Britain Returns to Asia, to China's Dismay", *The Diplomat*, July 30, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/britain-returns-to-asia-to-chinas-dismay/>

⁴ "Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018)", Ministry of External Affairs, June 01, 2018. <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>

⁵ Marcus Hellyer, "B-21 bomber could be Australia's best long-range strike option", *The Strategist*, May 24, 2021. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/b-21-bomber-could-be-australias-best-long-range-strike-option/>

⁶ *Japan Times*, "Japan will work with Lockheed Martin on new fighter jet, Defense Ministry says", December 18, 2020. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/12/18/national/lockheed-martin-new-fighter-jet/>