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What Does AUKUS Mean for China and Security in the Indo-Pacific Region?

CHEAM Panhavatey^a

KHENG Kunravin^b

YORN Socheat^c

On 15th September 2021, a tripartite defence partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States was signed and became known as “AUKUS”. The most crucial part of the deal is that the US and the UK will share their nuclear-powered submarine technology and other advanced military capabilities with Australia. While both Washington and London did not explicitly point to China or mention specifically what AUKUS would respond to, this new security coalition was created to counter China’s growing influence in the region. Will this trilateral partnership shake up the maritime security of the Indo-Pacific region? What will the future hold for the region?

Implications for China

Equipped with nuclear-powered submarines, the Royal Australian Navy can patrol larger areas of the Pacific Ocean and beyond more effectively with a low risk of getting detected by adversaries. Australia’s procurement of at least eight nuclear-powered submarines is expected to be delivered by 2040. They are expected to be used for patrolling the South China Sea, where China has controversially claimed almost all of it based on its historic “nine-dash line”. With the emergence of AUKUS, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) will potentially face a more capable Australian naval presence. This new coalition will also likely add to China’s strategic calculation about the Taiwan situation.

Even though Australia aims to boost its deterrence through AUKUS to patrol the Pacific Ocean and maintain its sea lines of communication, in the event of an escalated conflict with China, Australia’s new submarine capability will come in handy if it is to support the US’ involvement the way it did during previous conflicts. This factor would potentially threaten China’s maritime security and naval capabilities. As former US Undersecretary of Defense Michèle Flournoy stated, to deter China from changing the status quo in Taiwan, the US and its allies need to be able to respond to Beijing’s naval operations within the first 72 hours. Compared to the US Navy submarines, Beijing possesses less advanced technologies and limitations in anti-

^a **CHEAM Panhavatey** is a student at the Department of International Studies (DIS), Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP).

^b **KHENG Kunravin** is a student at DIS, RUPP.

^c **YORN Socheat** is an intern at the Centre for Inclusive Digital Economy (CIDE) at the Asian Vision Institute (AVI) and a student at DIS, RUPP.

submarine warfare. With US submarine technology, Australia will make the PLAN think more conscientiously before taking any drastic actions on Taiwan militarily.

Can AUKUS pull countries away from China?

Many Indo-Pacific countries largely see their economic relationship with China as a major factor in key policy decisions. This is particularly true for fast-growing Asian economies such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Because these nations continue to face severe economic development challenges, their governments commonly favour commercial relationships above security alliances. It is unlikely that those countries would cut ties with China over the defence partnership. In contrast, some may show concern that AUKUS would worsen Sino-American relations and exacerbate an arms race in the region, which could affect their national security and economic development.

Responding to AUKUS, China tends to project itself as an economic rather than military power. Quoted in *The Economist* published on 27 September 2021, Beijing stated, “The Indo-Pacific needs economic development, not submarines and gunpowder.” China’s comment on AUKUS reveals the loophole of the U.S. foreign policy in Asia, which focuses more on security rather than economic cooperation, explaining why there has been no security overture from Beijing since the announcement of AUKUS. Instead, Beijing declared its intention to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the successor to the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which the US helped negotiate but eventually abandoned. On top of that, the recent conclusion of RCEP that includes China but not the U.S, according to Hill’s opinion published in *The Interpreter* on 28 September 2021, gives Beijing more leverage on the economic front in the region. These engagements of China in regional economic integration build an image of AUKUS as a potential threat to the economic flow in the Indo-Pacific region.

Regional Security Dilemma

AUKUS has the potential to raise tensions and escalate an arms race in the region. It has also exposed the lack of ASEAN unity since all member states hold different views. Malaysia and Indonesia have raised concerns about how this cooperation would affect ASEAN centrality. Singapore takes a neutral stance and expects this agreement to strengthen regional stability and peace. Meanwhile, Vietnam and the Philippines are supporters of AUKUS, seeing it as a counterbalance to China’s growing military clout in the region. The remaining members either remain silent or proceed cautiously. The lack of agreement among the ASEAN Member States shows the disunity of ASEAN voices in response to regional political and security challenges.

Maritime security

The US and the UK want the South China Sea to be free for international navigation since it is a crucial corridor connecting South and East Asia. They are also concerned that freedom of navigation in the South China Sea is under threat by China’s construction of artificial islands. Furthermore, the US and the UK believe that, with nuclear-powered submarines, Australia will be capable of joining them in safeguarding freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and countering China’s military dominance in the region. With a new fleet of nuclear-powered submarines, Australia could project power deeper into the potential theatre of conflicts such as

the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait. It could also contribute better to a military alliance with the US because nuclear-powered submarines may submerge much longer than conventionally propelled submarines.

What's next?

Through the lens of the traditional security dilemma, a country's military improvement will compel other countries to strengthen their military power, leading to a cycle of arms race that will further deteriorate the existing security condition. AUKUS has undoubtedly increased regional uncertainty in the face of US-China strategic rivalry. According to Pongsudhirak's opinion published in the *Bangkok Post* on 15 October 2021, AUKUS may militarise an already militarised region and force countries to prepare for any eventuality in the coming years. China could also become more hostile towards the US and its allies due to fear of military containment and confrontation.

Overall, the formation of AUKUS is a key turning point indicating a new geopolitical trend in the Indo-Pacific region that will last for a long time. It is a power struggle between ambition, ideology, and politics. It is not a bilateral issue between China and Australia. Rather, it is a sign of conflicting security interests between China and the US and its allies.

Establishing AUKUS has triggered both fear and opportunity for China and the nations of the Indo-Pacific region. While the defence partnership strikes fear in the PLAN, it also opens the possibility for Beijing to rise as an economic power, gathering attention from countries that share the similar concern of AUKUS. Moreover, while AUKUS may contribute to freedom of navigation, it also encourages a regional arms race and power competition among major military powers, which have long-term implications for the Indo-Pacific region.

The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Asian Vision Institute.