

AUKUS displays European irrelevance

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Whether it was a coincidence or not, one day before Europe launched its own Indo-Pacific Strategyⁱ, the Australian Prime Minister Morrison announced the creation of AUKUS, 'a new enhanced trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States' (AU UK US).ⁱⁱ He was virtually flanked by President Biden of the United States and British Prime Minister Johnson. According to Morrison, AUKUS is 'a partnership where our technology, our scientists, our industry, our defense forces are all working together to deliver a safer and more secure region that ultimately benefits all'.ⁱⁱⁱ

Nuclear-powered submarines

The first achievement of AUKUS will be the planned delivery of at least eight nuclear-powered submarines to Australia by the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). In addition to the delivery of the nuclear-powered submarines, there will be cooperation in the fields of artificial intelligence, cyber, quantum technologies and 'complementary submarine capabilities', it is planned.^{iv}

This will also mark the end of the 'deal of the century' made five years earlier for the delivery of 12 diesel-electric submarines to Australia by French Naval Group. While there had been longstanding grievances between Australia and France over the progress and costs of this project, the French nevertheless claimed to have been caught completely off guard by the announcement of the AUKUS submarine deal and reacted with dismay and outrage.^v

China?

Interestingly, there was not a single mention of China, which eventually is at the center of this deal. The fact that the agreement focuses on the supply of nuclear-powered submarines is, however, a clear indication that this is all about building a dam against an increasingly assertive and aggressive China. Indeed, unlike diesel-electric submarines, a nuclear powered one is ideally suited to operate for a prolonged period and far from Australia, as in the disputed waters of the South China Sea, the focal point of Sino-American rivalry.^{vi}

'Stab in the back'.

Surprisingly, however, China's initial reaction was restrained and measured. A spokesman called the export of nuclear technology 'irresponsible'.^{vii} And Paris spoke of a 'breach of trust' and a 'stab in the back' and recalled the ambassadors from Canberra and Washington for consultations (not from London, incidentally, which according to a French sneer is merely the 'junior partner' within AUKUS).^{viii}

Brussels seemed more concerned with possible discord between America and Europe than angered by the Anglo-Saxon behaviour towards Paris, hence solidarity with France remained mainly verbal.^{ix} Germany and Denmark also were quick to stress the importance of good transatlantic ties.^x This could not, however, prevent the trade talks between the EU and Australia being postponed twice to spring 2022.^{xi}

Many uncertainties

For now, however, AUKUS amounts to no more than the intention of a special arms deal, given the transfer of nuclear technology. But even that arms deal has yet to materialize. In any case, Australia will have to wait

a long time for delivery of the submarines, which is not expected until 2040.^{xii} Speculation is already rife as to whether the country will be able to lease submarines from the US or UK in the meantime.^{xiii}

A somewhat under-reported aspect of the AUKUS agreement is that Australia, via the US and the UK, will gain access to various types of medium- and long-range weapons, including the Tomahawk cruise missile, before the end of the decade.^{xiv} Moreover, shortly after the presentation of AUKUS, it became known that the US is planning to open more military bases in Australia, and in the UK too, this is being considered.^{xv}

But much is still unclear. Will Australia buy American or British subs, of an existing type or one that has yet to be designed? Where will they be built? Will they be delivered on time? And does Australia have the knowledge to maintain the ships?^{xvi} Will the agreement survive a change of government in Canberra, London or Washington? What does AUKUS mean for the future of the European arms industry?^{xvii} And will there be any effort in the future to involve France or Japan in a 'FRAUKUS' or 'JAUUKUS'?

Australia: An Unforgiving China

As unexpected as AUKUS' announcement is, the deal did not come out of the blue. It is a response to Australia's radically changed geopolitical environment since the country struck a deal with France's Naval Group to supply 12 French diesel-electric submarines in 2016.^{xviii} Especially since the COVID-19 crisis, the relationship between Australia and China has deteriorated rapidly, culminating in China's openly published list of 14 reproaches to Australia in late 2020.^{xix} These reproaches were a reaction to, among other things, Australian comments on the human rights situation in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, the sidelining of Huawei and other Chinese companies in the tender for a 5G network and measures against foreign (read: Chinese) political influence.

This unprecedented Chinese attack and especially its irreconcilable tone must have convinced the Australians that there was no chance of getting the relationship back on track.^{xx} This may have been the decisive factor in Australia's decision to anchor the US presence in the Indo-Pacific more firmly, if need be at the expense of distant France, and to bind the country's destiny to the US. In this respect, China could do some soul searching regarding the emergence of AUKUS.

American foothold in the Indo-Pacific

For the US, the importance of AUKUS is obvious. It will have a foothold in the Indo-Pacific, relatively close to the focal point of the US-China rivalry in the South China Sea but still out of reach of much of China's vast arsenal of long-range weapons.^{xxi} Furthermore, it may have been an additional consideration for President Biden to strengthen US alliances in the Indo-Pacific by combining them with an arms deal, in case another 'America-First' president, focused on trade deals, should take up residence in the White House in the future.

Global Britain

Less clear is what exactly the UK's role will be, as the nuclear propulsion technology that will be shared with Australia is in fact American (having previously been shared by the US with the UK during the Cold War in 1958.) Prime Minister Boris Johnson mentioned jobs for the UK during the presentation, whereas Prime Minister Morrison expressed the intention to build the submarines in Australia.

Nonetheless, AUKUS also provides Britain with a foothold in the Indo-Pacific with the option of further expansion. As such, it lends substance to the concept of 'Global Britain', which until recently was little more

than a slogan. Moreover, for two medium-sized countries like the UK and Australia, it might be attractive to join forces vis-à-vis the big American partner.^{xxii}

Southeast Asia

In maritime Southeast Asia, the agreement was received with mixed feelings.^{xxiii} Singapore and the Philippines were unreservedly positive and saw AUKUS as a contribution to the balance of power in the region. The positive reception in Manila in particular is somewhat surprising, as the government led by President Duterte has been seeking rapprochement with China since 2016. The explanation may be that this benevolent attitude has so far yielded very little in terms of hoped-for Chinese economic investment or improved relations in the South China Sea.

Indonesia and Malaysia however, expressed their concern over a possible new arms race, which can be partly explained by the geographical position of both countries, located between Australia and China. Both countries are thus situated on the route of the envisaged Australian submarines on their way to their area of operation in the South China Sea. Cambodia and Vietnam remained silent with a noncommittal statement, while Brunei, current chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), had no comment at all.

Western discord

AUKUS has the potential to foster western discord as well. While the relationship between the Presidents Biden and Macron now seems to be back on track, the relationship between Australia and France is still troubled.^{xxiv} The fact that European countries, especially France, were kept completely in the dark, however understandable in the interest of secrecy, has thoroughly ruined the atmosphere in Paris. This is all the more regrettable since France has historically been at the forefront of the European pivot to Asia and the recent strategic publications with regard to the Indo-Pacific, first by France and later followed by Germany, the Netherlands and the EU.^{xxv}

If 'AUKUS' (and the exclusively American decision to evacuate Kabul) reveals anything, it is the fact that the US no longer takes European sensitivities into consideration. As a result, AUKUS risks dividing the West into a predominantly Anglo-Saxon camp and a European-continental camp, which will make it increasingly difficult to present a concerted front to China.^{xxvi} This has implications for European security as well. With the US and UK (and NATO itself, for that matter) increasingly focusing on Asia, Europe must reconsider the sustainability of the current European security architecture.^{xxvii}

Choices

Broadly speaking, Europe has the choice of either accepting the primacy of the Anglo-Saxon AUKUS countries with the corresponding limited influence that results from limited European military capacities: This summer, the American Secretary of Defence already openly expressed doubts about the usefulness of the British deployment in the Indo-Pacific, following the voyage of a British carrier strike group, supplemented by American and Dutch naval vessels, to Japan.^{xxviii}

The other extreme is the option of joining a French quest for greater European strategic autonomy and pursuing a less confrontational China policy.^{xxix} Danish and German reactions to AUKUS however already indicate that not every European country is eager to blindly support France if it were to opt for a more independent European geopolitical posture under the French leadership. On the one hand, this is due to the fear of alienating the US and on the other hand, to the suspicion that France will want to instrumentalise this European strategic autonomy primarily in service of French grandeur.^{xxx}

A third way: mini-lateral coalitions

Yet another possibility is that, following the example of AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a network of (ad-hoc) mini-lateral (semi-)alliances with like-minded partners will emerge, and depending on the circumstances, with or without the US. The Dutch deployment in the framework of the British/American/Dutch Carrier Strike Group 21 around the new British airship Queen Elisabeth might give an indication.^{xxxix} The web of previously sometimes unthought-of alliances that has emerged in recent years in and around the Mediterranean, often as a reaction to reduced American engagement, may also provide some guidance.^{xxxix}

European irrelevance

AUKUS and 'Kabul' have finally made the American 'pivot to Asia' (as verbally proclaimed since 2009) tangible and visible. Particularly striking here was how little relevant Europe was considered to be in Washington.^{xxxix} For the Netherlands and other European countries, AUKUS (and the way in which the agreement came about) therefore primarily shows, for now, the need to really start investing in their own defence capacities, if they want to be taken seriously at a global level and retain freedom of action.

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