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## Minilateralism: Rocking the Boat in Asia-Pacific



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# Minilaterals Destabilize the Asia-Pacific Region

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## The US Ramps Up the Asia-Pacific Minilateral Mechanism.

The minilateral mechanism is an important initiative taken by the US to rebuild the First Island Chain and the "Three-Sea Linkage" alliance strategy involving the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait. The US has ascertained that in the future, China will inevitably become involved in intense competition with several minilaterals, which will deplete China's strategic resources to the limit. The idea of alliance strategy, which runs throughout the overall US strategy for global hegemony, is in essence "to make allies or quasi-allies take more responsibility, with the US playing an integrative, dominant, and cohesive role."<sup>1</sup>

The US has concluded that China is "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it."<sup>2</sup> Based on this perception, the Biden administration has intensified its strategic competition with China, formed the "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework" (IPEF) with a focus on curbing China's influence, and promoted "techno-democracies," aiming to rally more countries with industrial and supply chains to build a "small yard, high fence" against China. Meanwhile, in order to gain an upper hand in its strategic competition with China, the US has stepped up its efforts to build minilateral frameworks in the Asia-

1 Fan Wang, "US Hegemony Strategy Based on the Idea of Superiority and Its Limitations," *China International Studies*, no. 6 (2023): 35-55, [https://www.cssn.cn/gjgc/gjgc\\_gcid/202401/t20240112\\_5728054.shtml](https://www.cssn.cn/gjgc/gjgc_gcid/202401/t20240112_5728054.shtml).

2 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, October 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

Pacific region, aiming to create a more flexible and intertwined system of alliances and partnerships.

The US created the US-Australia-Japan Trilateral Security Dialogue (TSD) in 2001 and launched the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) among the US, Japan, India, and Australia based on TSD in 2004. But it was not until Donald Trump's term in office that the Quad finally worked its "magic." However, the marginal effect of Quad has not been particularly evident due to various factors.

In order to make up for the weaknesses of the Quad, the US rushed to assemble another regional group dubbed the "Squad," which included Australia, Japan, and the Philippines, and conducted its first joint maritime exercise in the South China Sea on April 7, 2024. According to estimates by several US and European think tanks, the "Squad" is overtaking the Quad in importance, and may in the future constitute one of the two core pillars of the US "Indo-Pacific Strategy," in tandem with AUKUS.

Furthermore, several Asia-Pacific minilaterals have quickly grown in prominence in recent years and have garnered greater attention. Kent E. Calder, Director of the Edwin O. Reischauer Center for East Asian Studies at Johns Hopkins University, noted that a series of strategic triangles, including that of the US-Japan-Republic of Korea (ROK) and the US-Japan-Philippines, "are really the core of US foreign policy now."

The difficulties with traditional multilateralism are leading to a renewed focus on minilateralism by the international community.<sup>3</sup> Compared with bilateral or multilateral relations, minilateral relations have greater influence and lower costs for aligning interests, which makes it easier and more efficient to reach a consensus and make decisions. However, the minilateralist approach has become the core of the US diplomatic strategy to implement containment and encirclement against China. AUKUS, the US-Japan-ROK, the US-Japan-Philippines, and other minilaterals are even keener to promote the "Three-Sea Linkage" strategy to restructure the First Island Chain in a bid to blockade China.

The US has also pressed NATO to deepen its relations with the Asia-Pacific minilaterals to support its implementation of a two-front containment strategy against China. In particular, the "Indo-Pacific Four"

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3 Rajeswari Rajagopalan, "A Quad for the Middle East?," *ORF*, October 22, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/a-Quad-for-the-middle-east/>.

(IP4), consisting of Japan, the ROK, Australia, and New Zealand, have been repeatedly invited to attend the NATO summit. Back on September 26, 2022, the North Atlantic Council announced that it had accepted the request of the ROK government to designate its embassy to Belgium as the country's mission to NATO. These four countries, currently tagged as "partners across the globe" by NATO, are closely cooperating with NATO now. Among them, Japan, the ROK, and Australia are each engaging with NATO through their respective Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes (ITPPs). New Zealand is in the process of finalizing an ITPP.

The US has also established a quadrilateral group named I2U2 with India, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Washington's initial strategic vision was to promote a close linkage between I2U2 and the Quad to counter the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Therefore, I2U2 was initially deemed to be a companion project to the Quad. With this in hand, the Biden administration sought to integrate forces in the Asia-Pacific region and the Middle East to contain China's influence in both regions.

On October 18, 2021, the foreign ministers of the I2U2 member countries held a virtual meeting, and I2U2's first summit was held virtually on July 14, 2022. According to Kabir Taneja, fellow with the Strategic Studies Program at the Observer Research Foundation of India, the quadrilateral mechanism in West Asia suggests that India-US cooperation has progressed further and the two quadrilateral mechanisms in the East and the West can reinforce each other to provide a comprehensive counterbalance to China's influence.

### **AUKUS Takes the Stage.**

AUKUS was established on September 15, 2021. In view of its motivation and strategic environment at its formation, AUKUS is fundamentally aimed at containing China and is, in essence, a potential military alliance against China.<sup>4</sup> AUKUS, as an important geostrategic tool created by the US, was formed to resurrect "insular principles" globally and build the most elite minilateral security framework by joining hands with the UK and Australia, the two "insular countries" that are most similar to the US in terms of their strategic goals and conditions.<sup>5</sup> This is why the US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell called the AUKUS arrangement "the most important strategic innovation of this period."

4 Zhiyong Li, "Progress, Essence, and Strategic Implications of AUKUS," *International Cooperation Center*, March 1, 2023, <https://www.icc.org.cn/trends/mediareports/1507.html>.

5 Peng Wang and Jie Yan, "The Geostrategic Logic of the US Constructing AUKUS," *Contemporary American Review*, no. 1 (2022): 79-100, 125.

The AUKUS framework features the so-called Pillar I and Pillar II. Pillar I is for the US and UK to "support Australia in acquiring its first conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarine fleet." To this end, Australia scrapped the 90 billion AUD (approximately 69.9 billion USD) submarine deal it had entered with France in 2019. Pillar II involves development of cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence (AI), autonomous underwater vehicles, and long-range hypersonic missiles.

Nuclear-powered submarine cooperation is at the core of AUKUS. Given that it involves the transfer of large quantities of weapons-grade highly enriched uranium (HEU) and exploits the loopholes regarding military nuclear propulsion devices, it heavily damages the three growing nuclear non-proliferation paradigms, namely, military nuclear propulsion device transfers, dual-use item control, and nuclear breakout time.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, China maintains that AUKUS cooperation on nuclear-powered submarines "constitutes serious nuclear proliferation risks, brings negative impact to the international nuclear non-proliferation regime, provokes arms race and impairs peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region."<sup>7</sup>

The US also consistently leverages Taiwan to facilitate the development of minilaterals such as AUKUS. Campbell made a rare linkage between Taiwan and AUKUS, saying that new submarine capabilities would "enhance peace and stability" in the Taiwan Strait. It was reported that on April 8 this year, the so-called "navy chief" of Taiwan, Tang Hua, had a secret meeting with US chief of naval operations Lisa Franchetti in Washington, in regard to the US Joint Island Defense Concept, which aims to enhance Taiwan's military strength within the First Island Chain.

Since its establishment, AUKUS has been reaching out to other countries in the region, especially Japan. On February 18, 2024, Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defense Richard Marles said that Australia was keen to see Japan collaborate with the AUKUS security partnership and that Japan was a "place of innovation" and was "at the cutting edge of technology." "I think it is natural that we would be talking about a greater level of cooperation between the three countries—US, UK, and Australia—and Japan, in terms of joint collaborations going forward," he added. On April 8, the defense ministers of the AUKUS member states issued a joint statement, saying that they were considering cooperation with Japan under AUKUS Pillar II.

6 Bin Li and Xiang Li, "How Does the AUKUS Nuclear Submarine Cooperation Change the International Nuclear Non-Proliferation Norms," *Journal of International Security Studies*, no. 4 (May 2023): 3-28.

7 Song Li, "True Multilateralism Is the Answer to Maintaining the NPT Regime," transcript of speech delivered at the IAEA Board of Governors meeting, Vienna, March 9, 2023, [http://vienna.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/202303/t20230310\\_11038635.htm](http://vienna.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/202303/t20230310_11038635.htm).

In fact, as early as 2022, the US, UK, and Australia held informal talks with Japan about its participation in AUKUS. Taro Aso, Vice President of the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP), even made a high-profile statement that Japan should join AUKUS during his visit to Australia in 2023.

For Japan, participation in AUKUS will help enhance its security cooperation with the US, UK, and Australia and make it more crucial in the US Asia-Pacific minilateral mechanism. However, it will also affect Japan's normal exchanges with China and other Asia-Pacific countries.

Although Japan is not officially recognized as a member of AUKUS, bilateral security cooperation between Japan and the US, UK, and Australia has been progressing. In particular, following the signing of the Japan-Australia Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) in 2022 and the Japan-UK RAA in 2023, the Japan-UK and Japan-Australia bilateral interactions clearly exhibit the characteristics of quasi-military alliances. Therefore, for Japan, this is actually a form of indirect participation in AUKUS.

It can be predicted that Japan's engagement in AUKUS would be a step-by-step process. However, AUKUS is a military alliance with China as a strategic target, and, therefore, any form of engagement in AUKUS would mean treating China as a security antagonist. On April 8, 2024, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning pointed out, "We oppose relevant countries cobbling together exclusive groupings and stoking bloc confrontation. Japan needs to earnestly draw lessons from history and stay prudent on military and security issues."<sup>8</sup>

In late August 2023, the UK House of Commons issued a report saying that Japan and the ROK should be invited to join AUKUS. On April 23, 2024, Bonnie Jenkins, US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, said that since the beginning of AUKUS, the US President and trilateral leaders had been clear in their intent to engage others in Pillar II advanced capability projects, and Japan was the first to be consulted. On May 1, 2024, the sixth ROK-Australia Foreign and Defense Ministers' (2+2) Meeting was held in Melbourne, where both sides explored possible ROK engagement in AUKUS. Canada and New Zealand are also recognized as potential AUKUS partners.

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on April 8, 2024*, April 8, 2024, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/202404/t20240408\\_11277991.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202404/t20240408_11277991.html).

## **US "Extreme Competition" Strategy via Minilateral Mechanism in Asia-Pacific**

Currently, the US is practicing an asymmetric strategy of competition, i.e., taking whatever measures possible to weaken China's strength (limiting China's ability to transmute its strength into the power that influences the regional and global order).<sup>9</sup> While the Biden administration prefers "extreme competition" with China without resorting to military conflict, but such an extreme version of competition is probably only an inch away from conflict. Nowadays, "extreme competition" is reflected in the increasingly cross-domain nature of the US-led minilaterals in the Asia-Pacific, with the aim of advancing policy coordination among allies and partners across various sectors, including economy, security, and high technology, overstressing the concept of national security and ideologizing agendas in various fields, and pushing forward the cross-domain competition against China.

The US not only employs the Asia-Pacific minilateral mechanism to shape and solidify its allies' perception of China as a hostile country, but also repeatedly spreads negative rhetoric to denigrate China. What's more, under the minilateral mechanism, the US constantly exercises maximum pressure on China by intertwining and stoking all the concerns on such issues as the Taiwan question, the Korean Peninsula issue, the Sino-Japanese frictions, and the Sino-Indian border tensions, amongst other focal issues. Additionally, the US imposes "hard" containment measures on China under the pretense of "soft" security issues. For example, recently, there has been strong support from the US for the Philippines regarding territorial disputes in the South China Sea, creating obstacles for China's efforts to promote regional peace. The escalation of the US hegemonic strategy in the region is unprecedentedly calling for and pushing China to maintain its strategic focus and necessary anti-hegemony capacities in the face of challenges.

Meanwhile, following the ongoing expansion of the US Asia-Pacific minilateral mechanism, the pressure on relevant countries to take sides has risen exponentially, which also exerts a major impact on China's process of modernization. In this regard, China needs to maintain strategic patience and focus, ensuring accurate, in-depth, and objective analysis and judgment of the unfolding situation, and be well-prepared

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<sup>9</sup> Wang, "US Hegemony Strategy."



with strategic planning and positioning while adopting a multipronged approach to respond firmly.

The most effective way for Beijing to resist the US Asia-Pacific minilaterals is for China to keep building up its composite national strength and deepen its reform and opening up further in preparation for its accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which is as important as China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. With the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) coming into full effect, China officially submitted its application to join the CPTPP on September 16, 2021, and has been actively promoting the establishment of a free trade area (FTA) with Japan and the ROK. This is the necessary path for responding to US "extreme competition"—leveraging reform to drive development and seizing opportunities through opening up. Furthermore, for the greater good of the whole world, China would also remain committed to building a community with a shared future for mankind, now through the practical framework of the BRI, contributing to global modernization that foreshadows peaceful development, mutually beneficial cooperation, and prosperity for all.

# Washington's China Strategy: Same Playbook, New Target

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It is often tempting to view things from the myopia of the moment. When considering AUKUS, the Quad, American Defense White Papers, gunboat diplomacy, Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), containment policies, tariffs, blacklists, and Tonya Harding defenses, it is easy to focus on the moment, but looking at recent history can be more revealing.

In the 1970s, the US faced numerous challenges: the oil crisis, the retreat from Vietnam, the opening of relations with China, Watergate, the creation of the petrodollar, rising inflation, declining productivity, and industrial decline, as sectors like automobiles, electronics, and steel moved to more competitive markets like Japan.

On one hand, America's military weaknesses were exposed. On the other, the stage was being set for America's future financial dominance through the petrodollar. What started as admiration and a desire to emulate Japan's miracle rise eventually transitioned into fear and loathing. A rise that many who think in linear, zero-sum terms linked to America's decline. The same cycle is being repeated today, only this time the target is China.

Military defeats in Afghanistan, stalemates in Yemen, Syria, Iran, Somalia, and Gaza, the failure of, but continued use of sanctions, the Ukraine conflict, broken treaties, the undermining of international institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO), the decline of dollar dominance, rising inflation, declining

productivity, industrial decline in sectors like automobiles, electronics, and steel as these industries moved on to more competitive markets, polarized domestic politics, and unpopular leaders have all contributed to a bipartisan search for an appropriate scapegoat for Washington's institutional failures. This is underscored by the decline of the middle class, from 61% of the population 50 years ago to 50% today.

With Washington's weaknesses on full display, China has replaced Japan as America's scapegoat, but Beijing will not be willing to suffer Japan's fate.

The success of Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry's (MITI) economic coordination efforts went from being widely admired and something to emulate to a nefarious scheme to undermine America.

Similarly, the success of China's National Development and Reform Commission, once lauded as a seminal factor in China's rise, is now seen as a nefarious scheme to undermine America.

Books in the 1970s and '80s presented Japan, variously, as a model for America's future economic development or as a malign juggernaut intent on overtaking the US:

- Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber's *The World Challenge* (1981)
- Edward A. Feigenbaum and Pamela McCorduck's *The Fifth Generation: Artificial Intelligence and Japan's Computer Challenge to the World* (1983)
- New York Times Magazine article "The Danger from Japan" by Theodore H. White (1985)
- Donald Trump, full-page ads in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Boston Globe stating that "for decades, Japan and other nations have been taking advantage of the United States" (1987)
- Members of Congress smash Japanese electronics with sledgehammers on the lawn of the US Capitol (1987)
- Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1989)

- Pat Choate's *Agents of Influence: How Japan's Lobbyists in the United States Manipulate America's Political and Economic System* (1990)
- Michael A. Cusumano's *Japan's Software Factories: A Challenge to US Management* (1991)
- George Friedman and Meredith Lebard's *The Coming War with Japan* (1991)
- T. Boone Pickens, Pat Choate, and Christopher Burke's *The Second Pearl Harbor: Say No to Japan* (1992)

By the 1980s, fears about Japan Inc.'s success, growing trade imbalances, and Japanese purchases of properties like the Rockefeller Center and Pebble Beach had reached a crescendo, with some citing the "real possibility that economic squabbles between countries would boil over into another conflict in the Pacific." Coincidentally, those pushing anti-Japanese hysteria, based on Japan's superiority in "strategic" emerging technologies like computer chips, software, and AI, saw it as an existential economic and security threat to America's future.

Washington's answer to Japan's rise was the Plaza Accords, an agreement to prop up the US economy through currency devaluation. US manufacturers were allowed to use favorable exchange rates to boost their profitability. As a result, Japan is worth less today, in real dollar terms, than when it signed the Accords in 1985.

Today, China faces the same litany of books, articles, actions, and predictions as Japan did. The difference lies in China's economic footprint, understanding of history, and in its worldview. It is the difference between zero-sum and win-win "building a community with a shared future for mankind."

**The larger question is why the US needs a scapegoat when it fails.**

Most of the Asian leaders aligning with Washington's "China threat" narratives and containment policies have short-term political priorities, rather than long-term economic goals.

In Japan and South Korea, unpopular leaders have turned to the international stage to assign blame for domestic situations that defy easy fixes. Meanwhile, the rest (the majority) of China's neighbors are cognizant and wary of US political and military actions in Asia, having experienced them before (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia,

Indonesia, etc.) and having seen what they have brought and are bringing to the world (Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, Ukraine, Gaza, etc.).

In terms of China, its rapid economic rise and the prosperity it has brought to Asian economies are admired, but the sheer speed and size of China's growth has caused unease, especially among countries that are concerned that China might act like the US. Unfortunately, those concerns are being warped and fanned by a nervous Washington elite, who sees China in the same way they saw Japan in the 1970s, as a threat to US economic hegemony.

Washington's response to China has been to use economic and military pressure to push political interests, specifically aiming to replace the Communist Party system. This marks a significant change from the past, when the US used politics and the military to push economic interests.

### **America Is an Empire vs. China Is a Civilization**

All civilizations started as empires, but not all empires became civilizations.

One way of looking at the issue is in terms of the difference in their development levels and approaches.

Empires are outward-facing: they are aggressive and dominate others as a means of building power and legitimacy. For the US, this has meant being in conflict for all but 17 of its 248-year history. It has insisted that its powers as an Exceptional nation allow it to extend its control over South America (the Monroe Doctrine) to the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.

What gives the US the right to declare itself an "Indo-Pacific" power, let alone claim dominion over all parts of the Earth? The answer is simple, and is what the US as an empire has always done: whatever means, politically, economically, and/or militarily, might makes right.

Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry forced Japan to open up its ports to resupply US whalers, setting in motion Japan's imitation of imperialism, which led to Japanese aggression before and during WWII. The US Yangtze Patrol in China was put in place to protect US interests without regard to sovereignty. South Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and others suffered under the same aggression.

Civilizations tend to be inward-facing: they defend what they have as they deal with the societal issues that come after their empire periods. For China, its civilization took a radical change from an outdated and corrupt system to the progress it has achieved over the last 75 years. What remains though are the societal, cultural, and legal values that are endemic to China.

Empires fall when they are either defeated militarily or decline internally.

Civilizations used to fail due to wars or famines, but as societal expectations have changed, governments are now expected to provide individual (safety, order, food, shelter, clothing, predictability) and societal (roads, water, sewer, communications, opportunity) essentials. The key difference is that civilizations develop and live by laws and social values, whereas empires rely on force.

The relevance of this distinction is that, historically, conflicts erupt when values fail.

American Exceptionalism is a logical fallacy: insisting on moral superiority whilst ignoring personal failings. Today, it is increasingly wearing thin.

For example, according to the February 21, 2024 Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report, US trade policy has generally sought to advance US economic growth and competitiveness by reducing international trade and investment barriers, fostering an open, transparent, and nondiscriminatory rules-based trading system through the WTO.

Except, since Obama's presidency, Washington has refused to allow any WTO appellate judges to be seated, which means if a party appeals a lower tribunal ruling, there can be no binding ruling.

In this case and many others, Washington's hypocrisy and accusations of others of doing what the US has done, and is doing, have become the standard operating procedure. However, this tactic becomes less persuasive the more it is used.

It is a pity, given that if the US practiced 60% of the values it preached from trade, finance, human rights, self-determination, primacy of law, and respect for international institutions, it would have at least some credibility. Instead, Washington has become a rogue state, financed by a Ponzi scheme that practices the opposite of what it preaches.

Into this toxic brew, Washington has returned to the old playbook used in South America, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and Asia: to divide and create chaos as a means of maintaining American hegemony. AUKUS and the Quad are strategies to contain China's rise. The question arises: to what end? It is a question that no one in Washington is willing to answer, other than to recite their faith in American Exceptionalism.

Domestically, things are no better, with Gaza calling into question America's values. Money flows freely for wars and weapons, while domestic concerns about voting rights, free speech, abortion, guns, drugs, poverty, homelessness, literacy, immigration, and hope for a better future are given lip service but no resources.

The biggest question facing America, and the world, is the Trump question. Will the king of MAGA, even if convicted, be the next president, and will he follow through on his campaign promises to put "America First" at the expense of the rest of the world? As an unapologetic transactionalist, Trump is expected to press America's interests without regard to values. However, if Biden is re-elected, he will continue to blindly follow his notion of American Exceptionalism, which espouses values but does not exemplify them.

This means that neither Trump nor Biden is expected to embrace a vision of "building a community with a shared future for mankind," but we can hope the next generation of American leaders might. This means China's economic and security concerns will have to be addressed without the US, perhaps collectively through consensus with those who are actually involved, like ASEAN and the "rest of the world."

# Asia-Pacific in Flux

Warwick Powell



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## Introduction

The three-decade-long sugar high of American unipolarity has come to an end. The come-down is denied by some, but the reality of adaptive necessity is painful.

America's minilateral initiatives in Asia must be seen within this context. Undoubtedly, they are aimed at "containing China." The heart of this strategy is to enlist former colonies, post-war client states, and sub-imperial allies. The most recent quadrilateral agreement has been among Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and the US, dubbed the "Squad."<sup>1</sup> This comes on the back of the Quad (US, Japan, India, and Australia) and AUKUS (Australia, UK, and US).

This flurry of minilateral activities reflects a waning regional hegemon riddled with displacement anxiety. What was dubbed the "American Lake" in the years immediately after World War II, controlled by an expansive military presence in North and Southeast Asia, is beginning to show its limitations. America's hegemonic grip, exercised via a combination of military and financial-cum-economic levers, has loosened. The minilaterals are part of a strategic ambition to either hold onto whatever elements of US primacy are left or to reclaim lost primacy. For the US, China is viewed as the greatest geopolitical threat,

<sup>1</sup> "'Squad' Goals: Consolidating the New Quadrilateral Partnership," *Lowy Institute*, May 9, 2024, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/squad-goals-consolidating-new-quadrilateral-partnership>.



which has been made clear time and again by those in the present US administration and Congress.

The rationale of the minilaterals is clothed in the rhetoric of "deterrence." The argument posits that the deterrence of China by force leads to peace and stability in the region. Contrary to this claim, I suggest that the pursuit of American Primacy in the name of deterrence doctrine is actually aggravating regional insecurities and increasing the risks of conflict. Put plainly, the pursuit of US Primacy in Asia is detrimental to stability and peace in the region. If the US and its regional allies genuinely seek regional stability and peace, they should abandon the strategic policy framed by the deterrence doctrine. Instead, there should be a greater commitment to engaging in regional multilateralism. However, regional multilateralism, anchored by ASEAN centrality, would be incompatible with American Primacy.

### **Asian Primacy?**

Since 2000, America's overall defense budget has accumulated to 16.05 trillion USD, which is not trivial.<sup>2</sup> The US maintains a significant presence across Asia, with over 80,000 permanent military personnel stationed at more than 240 military bases across Northeast Asia and the Pacific region.<sup>3</sup> The American security doctrine sees US security interests in all quarters of the globe; nowhere is immune from US intervention if the US deems it necessary.

The US military footprint in Asia has been normalized in much mainstream commentary. Against this backdrop of normalization, any increases in the military capability of others are portrayed as destabilizing. This is how China's military modernization has been presented. By ignoring the existing US build-up, coupled with its historic and contemporary aims of blunting China, the narrative suggests that China's actions are unprovoked aggression. This is the same gambit that's been employed in Central Europe.

The American blue water navy is supposedly the most feared array of destructive capability ever amassed. Yet, despite decades of head start and insuperable defense spending leadership, the US has reached a point where many now doubt its primacy in Asia. In a recent lecture at the US Naval War College, Professor James Holmes, a former US navy

<sup>2</sup> Military Spending in the United States from the Fiscal Year of 2000 to 2022," Statista, last updated November 30, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272473/us-military-spending-from-2000-to-2012/>.

<sup>3</sup> Deployment of US Active-Duty Military & Civilian Personnel Around the World," Statista, last updated December 30, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/222920/deployment-of-us-troops-in-selected-world-regions/>; "US Military Presence in the Asia Pacific," *Asia Pacific Research Network*, February 19, 2024, <https://www.aprnet.org/us-military-presence-in-the-asia-pacific/>.

surface-warfare officer, cautioned against the assumption that budget is equivalent to effectiveness. He made a compelling argument for why purchasing power parity (PPP) is a more meaningful way of comparing countries, asserting that either China or Russia got more for a dollar invested than the Americans did. He takes aim at various "zombie" arguments about American naval prowess and maritime strategy (such as budget, tonnage, and number of hulls or airframes) before turning to the map of the Pacific to show why it is so hard for the US navy to overpower a rival great power in its own backyard.

For analysts such as Elbridge Colby, former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development, the immediate challenge for the US is to regain some semblance of "balance in its favor."<sup>4</sup> The fact that the notion of "balance in our favor" is oxymoronic seems to have eluded Colby. Colby argues for more budget allocation to America's capacity in Asia, based on the premise that the US must accept budget constraints. Consequently, he argues that Europe should shoulder a greater share of the budget responsibility for NATO's defense requirements. Colby has argued that the US cannot sustain a two-war strategy and it must reduce its commitments in Europe and the Middle East; otherwise, it will not be able to deal with the issues in Asia.

Besides budgetary concerns, industrial capacity is another area of material constraint. The necessity for the US military to upgrade its industrial capacity to "defend" Taiwan is now a frequent recognition of contemporary conditions. Put plainly, the US has no choice but to enlist its Asian client states, former colonies, and sub-imperial allies into a new mission of primacy reclamation. The various minilaterals reflect both vestigial leverage and loyalty, as well as serve as a symptom of American limitations. The aim, however, will be to subsume partner forces under American military command should the need arise. Interoperability is a key design imperative so as to meet expectations that allied forces will accede to US-dictated priorities.

The American blue water navy is powerful, no doubt, but it is not omnipotent. The tyranny of distance is a primary threat to US military success in the western Pacific, together with the tyranny of water, time, and scale. Many of America's naval vessels are currently in dry dock. Almost 40% of US attack submarines are out of commission at any one

4 "China's Mounting Challenge to US Hegemony," *The Intercept*, April 11, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/04/05/intercepted-china-us-hegemony/>.

time.<sup>5</sup> Skilled worker shortages and supply chain issues delay repairs. Maintenance programs are encumbered by massive backlogs, impacting deployment availability.<sup>6</sup> Maintenance program delays compound serious doubts about the durability of much of the hardware. The USS Boxer has, for example, had to return for further maintenance just ten days into a Pacific deployment.

Air dominance is another dimension of US military power in the Pacific that is now in serious doubt. Distance from supply lines weakens the capacity of force projection (as demonstrated by the supply chain failures in Ukraine), which undermines US airpower deterrence. According to some analysts, China's air force could "achieve air denial, and possibly even air superiority, without ever defeating US air superiority fighters in combat."<sup>7</sup> Whether the US air force is combat-ready at all is another question that casts a pall of doubt over American capability. The American F-16 has experienced a number of in-flight emergencies of late,<sup>8</sup> and there are doubts as to the US military's ability to keep the F-35 in the air due to spare parts shortages hampered by poor training of maintenance crew.<sup>9</sup> There also are doubts as to the suitability of America's aging amphibious vehicles.<sup>10</sup>

More recently, the failure to bring the Houthis to heel in the Red Sea exemplifies these combat limitations. The braggadocio isn't matched by performance. None of this is to suggest that the US does not boast high destructive capability, but there are sufficient grounds publicly available to conclude that unilateral preponderance is not a modern reality. This conclusion may not be to the liking of "primacists" in Washington and the wider network of American allies globally and in Asia, but it remains a present-day reality.

### The US-Japan-Philippines Trilateral

While the recent trilateral meeting involving the leaders of the US, Japan, and the Philippines was hailed by some observers as emblematic of America's unwavering commitment to its interests in Asia, it paradoxically evinced a sense of funeral rites in progress. Just as Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, in his speech to the American Congress, lauded America's role as a global peace anchor since eviscerating two Japanese cities in 1945, injecting a sense of boosterism in the face of American "self-doubt," he was also singing a hymn to the end of

- 5 Oren Liebermann, "Nearly 40% of US Attack Submarines in or Awaiting Repair as Shipyards Face Worker Shortages, Supply Chain Issues," *CNN*, July 12, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/07/12/politics/us-attack-submarines-repair/index.html>.
- 6 Megan Eckstein, "Interview: NAVSEA 'Headed in the Right Direction' After Years of Maintenance Backlogs," *USNI News*, June 16, 2017, <https://news.usni.org/2017/06/15/interview-navsea-headed-right-direction-years-maintenance-backlogs>.
- 7 Maximilian Bremer and Kelly Grieco, "The Pentagon Needs Fresh Ideas for Evading Taiwan Logistics Pitfalls," *Defense News*, December 4, 2023, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/2023/12/04/the-pentagon-needs-fresh-ideas-for-evading-taiwan-logistics-pitfalls/>.
- 8 Brad Lendon and Oren Liebermann, "US F-16 Fighter Crashes off South Korea in Third Loss of Korea-Based Jet in a Year," *CNN*, January 31, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/31/asia/south-korea-us-f-16-fighter-jet-crash-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>.
- 9 US Government Accountability Office, *F-35 Aircraft: DOD and the Military Services Need to Reassess the Future Sustainment Strategy*, September 21, 2023, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-105341>.
- 10 Gabriel Honrada, "US Marines Rush Wonky Amphibious Vehicles to the Pacific," *Asia Times*, February 3, 2024, <https://asiatimes.com/2024/01/us-marines-rush-wonky-amphibious-vehicles-to-the-pacific/>.

America's unipolarity in Asia.<sup>11</sup> He damned American incapacity with faint praise just as he readied to debut Japan as a fully-fledged exporter of next-generation fighter aircraft to be jointly developed with the UK and Italy.<sup>12</sup> Kishida is undoubtedly committed to an American presence in Asia, but Japan's re-energized military posture speaks to a strategic reckoning that the US is no longer capable of being the unilateral hegemon of Asia. When Kishida said "the US should not be expected to do it all, unaided and on your own," the message wasn't so subtle: the US can no longer do it on its own.

Kishida's speech to the American Congress comes at a time when the United States has intensified its efforts to assert or reclaim American Primacy in Asia. Assert if one holds the view that it still holds military preponderance; reclaim if one believes that it doesn't. Kishida is in the latter camp. Through a series of so-called minilateral arrangements, the US has in recent years sought to enlist its Asia-Pacific client states, former colonies and sub-imperial allies to anchor a 21st-century bulwark on the western edge of the "American Lake."

The Quad, AUKUS, and now the trilateral involving Japan and the Philippines form part of a lattice-like network, in all practical intents and purposes, aimed squarely at the containment of China. The rationalization behind this network is the preservation of regional stability and a "free and open Indo-Pacific," with the deterrence of Chinese "aggression" in the South China Sea and across the Taiwan Strait as the two immediate focal points. While the latest trilateral is all about China, Japan is exploiting the contemporary circumstances to abandon its pacifist posture, and reassert itself as a military force that can one day step out of America's shadow.

11 Fumio Kishida, "For the Future: Our Global Partnership," transcript of speech delivered at a Joint Meeting of the United States Congress, Washington D.C., April 11, 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Full-text-of-Japanese-Prime-Minister-Kishida-s-speech-to-U.S.-Congress>.

12 Kiyoshi Sugawa, "Japan Debuts as a Weapons Exporter," *Responsible Statecraft*, April 16, 2024, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/weapons-japan/>.

## AUKUS

The unfolding AUKUS nuclear submarines debacle exemplifies the financial and industrial limitations of the American military-industrial complex. It also illustrates confusion amongst its allies as to both the state of play and purpose.

The financing of the nuclear submarines - the signature feature of the AUKUS arrangement - is something left for the Australians. Australian Congress itself remains deeply concerned about American production

capacity to meet its own requirements, let alone supply submarines that would be lost to American control. Each year, on average, the US builds 1.2 to 1.3 submarines. To meet its own targets, it needs to increase output to an average of two Virginia-class submarines per year. If it's supposed to deliver three submarines to Australia in the 2030s, output would need to rise to 2.33 per year.<sup>13</sup> This is unlikely. Recent budget cuts in the US for next year's submarine program have catalyzed a flurry of handwringing amongst AUKUS proponents as they seek to allay any public concerns about either US commitment or program viability.<sup>14</sup>

Protestations to the contrary have so far failed to rescue the AUKUS proposition from claims that Australia's involvement represents a concrete diminution of national sovereignty on a nation's most critical question: national security. Instead, the chorus of concerns that AUKUS represents subordination to American priorities continues to broaden and find voice across the Australian body politic. Unsurprisingly, expectations that the submarines will ultimately not be lost to American command were made clear recently by Kurt Campbell, US Deputy Secretary of State,<sup>15</sup> affirming long-held concerns that the AUKUS deal would subordinate Australian sovereignty when it matters most - in a conflict over Taiwan.<sup>16</sup>

AUKUS is also causing disturbances to the peace within the region, with Pacific Island nations and Southeast Asian nations expressing varying degrees of discomfort or concern. Pacific Island leaders have cautioned New Zealand that their relative silence on the AUKUS question does not imply support for New Zealand's interest in joining the arrangement.<sup>17</sup> The same could be said for Australia, which has so far failed to convince both a concerned region and a skeptical public that AUKUS makes strategic or tactical sense.

Indeed, the failure of its advocates to fully persuade the Australian public of AUKUS' merits has caused some of its strongest institutional supporters to publicly express their worries. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) has expressed concern that the arguments about why AUKUS warrants support have not been sufficiently well presented.<sup>18</sup> They call for improved messaging. The problem is that by making this call, it is assumed that there is a cogent case. But there isn't, and that's the nub of the problem.

13 Congressional Research Service, *Navy Virginia-Class Submarine Program and AUKUS Submarine Proposal: Background and Issues for Congress*, January 7, 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL32418/269>.

14 Maya Carlin, "Virginia-Class Submarines Get Cut in US Navy Budget—Why?," *The National Interest*, March 15, 2024, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/virginia-class-submarines-get-cut-us-navy-budget%E2%80%94why-210030>.

15 Michael Martina and David Brunnstrom, "Senior US Diplomat Links AUKUS Submarine Pact to Taiwan," *Reuters*, April 4, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/senior-us-diplomat-links-aukus-submarine-pact-taiwan-2024-04-03/>.

16 Alison Broinowski, "Australia's Sub-Sovereignty: AUKUS, ANZUS and Our Subservience," *Arena*, September 28, 2023, <https://arena.org.au/australias-sub-sovereignty-AUKUS-anzus-and-our-subservience/>.

17 Eleisha Foon, "'Don't Mistake Pacific Leaders AUKUS Quietness' as Support for NZ, Says Academic," *Evening Report*, May 6, 2024, <https://eveningreport.nz/2024/05/06/dont-mistake-pacific-leaders-aukus-quietness-as-support-for-nz-says-academic/>.

18 Nishank Motwani, "AUKUS Faces Mounting Challenges, Australia Must Address Them," *The Diplomat*, May 8, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/aukus-faces-mounting-challenges-australia-must-address-them/>.

Strong voices have emerged from within the mainstream defense and security community, questioning AUKUS from a strategic standpoint. Strategic and operational doubts and risks are intertwined, as an operationally problematic or extremely risky plan invariably casts doubt on the original strategic intent.

Strategically, as noted, doubts have been raised in relation to the impact on Australian sovereignty. Jonathan Caverley, a researcher at the US Naval War College, recently observed that "Australia, and any other country entering AUKUS in the future, will pay in autonomy as much as in dollars."<sup>19</sup> He goes on to say that:

Whatever is actually produced by the AUKUS deal, the only concrete outcome to date has been Australia spending over half a billion US dollars - the epitome of setting money on fire - to signal its total reliance on the US for security.

However, the persistent question of implementation risks refuses to go away. Research academics Brendan O'Connor, Lloyd Cox, and Danny Cooper have discussed a broad range of strategic uncertainties, including the "bet" on American stability and long-term commitment.<sup>20</sup> Former Australian submariner and federal senator Rex Patrick recently delivered a scathing assessment of the project risks associated with the proposed submarine program.<sup>21</sup> He didn't need to question the strategic merit to demonstrate that there's a significant amount of "pie in the sky" thinking behind the plan.

This "pie in the sky" thinking has material consequences. These will impact Australia's "room to move" when it comes to bilateral relations with China. The AUKUS deal is part of a wider plan to reform the Australian Defense Force, which was deemed "not fully fit for purpose" in a 2023 review. This realization follows two decades of accumulated policy failures that have progressively seen the dilution of Australia's sovereign capacity as part of the nation's overall defense capabilities.

In the Australian 2000 Defense White Paper, the highest priority was stated as being "able to defend Australia without relying on the combat forces of other countries." By 2023, the concession was made that Australia could not meet its defense requirements without dependence

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan D. Caverley, "AUKUS: When Naval Procurement Sets Grand Strategy," *International Journal* 78, no. 3 (August 16, 2023): 327–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207020231195269>.

<sup>20</sup> Brendan O'Connor, Lloyd Cox, and Danny Cooper, "Australia's AUKUS 'Bet' on the United States: Nuclear-Powered Submarines and the Future of American Democracy," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 77, no. 1 (January 2, 2023): 45–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2022.2163977>.

<sup>21</sup> Rex Patrick, "AUKUS Risks Unveiled – Is Australia Sleepwalking into a Submarines Disaster?," *Michael West Media*, March 12, 2024, <https://michaelwest.com.au/aucus-submarines-risk-too-high/>.

on the US. Between now and 2040, Australia will rely on America for its defense. The delays in delivering the AUKUS submarines increase this risk even further, leading former senior Australian defense executive Mike Scrafton to recently observe that:

If the used Virginia class purchase falls through or is delayed by two or three years, Australia will not have an effective capability for defending the strategic approaches to Australia, or an effective submarine force, for the next twenty years. There is no alternative plan for Australia's independent defense.<sup>22</sup>

Under these circumstances, in narrow defense policy terms, Australia's capacity to act autonomously is severely constrained. It is, in effect, becoming dependent on someone else with limited ability to influence them. These material conditions have the propensity to transform Australia from a sub-imperial power into a dependent vassal.

Paradoxically, America's limited manufacturing capacity will, intentionally or otherwise, limit Australia's capacity to act independently within the Asia region, unless Australia is once again willing to address the contradiction at the heart of its foreign and defense policies.

AUKUS shines a light squarely on the contradiction: whether Australian foreign and defense policy is to be designed to align with US Primacy doctrine (as it appears with AUKUS) or focus on dealing with an Asia where American Primacy is not only a thing of the past but also contrary to the current multipolar dynamics of the region.

### **Asian Multipolarity and US Deterrence Doctrine**

Much of the talk about the need to build up America's position in Asia hinges on the doctrine of deterrence, with the stated objective to "deter" China from aggression in the South China Sea and/or the Taiwan Strait.

China has a greater interest than the US in ensuring the South China Sea remains safe for commercial traffic. The US has been studying possible ways of blocking passageways through the Strait of Malacca for years. This has, undoubtedly, conditioned China's assessment of the risk to freedom of commercial navigation. In 2003, then Chinese President Hu

<sup>22</sup> Mike Scrafton, "It's a Huge Policy Failure That Australia Can't Defend Itself," *Pearls and Irritations*, March 15, 2024, <https://johnmenadue.com/its-a-huge-policy-failure-that-australia-cant-defend-itself/>.

Jintao spoke specifically of the "Malacca Dilemma," which referred to a lack of alternatives and vulnerability to a naval blockade. He further suggested that "certain powers have consistently encroached on and tried to control navigation through the Strait."<sup>23</sup> These "certain powers" are undoubtedly a reference to the US. In the past 20 years, however, the balance of power in the South China Sea has clearly shifted. The US navy no longer has *carte blanche* control over this body of ocean.

Territorial disputes remain points of contention. The tensions over the Ren'ai Jiao are the most visible manifestation of this. Despite US President Joe Biden's recent declaration of "ironclad" support for the Philippines, it's doubtful that the US will be drawn into direct naval engagement with China over the dispute. China will continue to forcefully assert and defend its position, just as the Philippines will do.

In relation to the Taiwan question, the emerging conventional Western trope revolves around a balancing dilemma. This has been recently described by Australian Ambassador to the US, Kevin Rudd, as to how to deter an "invasion of Taiwan" without provoking unilateral action from China.<sup>24</sup>

The doctrinal and practical dilemmas are laid bare in the lacuna of Rudd's formulation. First, there can be no invasion of one's own country. Second, unilateral Chinese action only comes with *de facto* or *de jure* moves toward independence. Support neither, and there's next to no risk of unilateral Chinese action. So, where do different minilateral participants stand on these pivotal issues? For example, where does Australia stand on the Taiwan question? If it does not support independence - as claimed for decades - then there is no basis for contemplating deterrence as a meaningful question, unless it wants to involve itself in the affair. Third, if there's any real concern about cross-strait conflict, what are third parties doing to promote peace and enhance the prospects that the tension will end without bloodshed?

The deterrence doctrine is not a pathway to creating meaningful peace. Instead, it risks catalyzing escalation and further destabilization. The American pursuit of "balance in our favor" is the demonstrative evidence of the escalatory potential of the deterrence doctrine. The mainstream narrative that, in effect, normalizes America's decades-old

<sup>23</sup> Marc Lanteigne, "China's Maritime Security and the 'Malacca Dilemma,'" *Asian Security* 4, no. 2 (April 29, 2008): 143–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799850802006555>.

<sup>24</sup> Kevin Rudd, "The Complex Challenges of Integrated Deterrence," transcript of speech delivered at the United States Naval Academy's Foreign Affairs Conference, Maryland, April 10, 2024, <https://usa.embassy.gov.au/node/386>.



military dominance in the Pacific, North, and Southeast Asia in particular suggests that China's military modernization is the catalyst justifying US containment as a response, in the name of deterring China's "aggression." However, China's modernization is actually a response to an environment where it finds itself surrounded by American military installations.

The failure of deterrence to work in Gaza is a recent example of another aspect of the doctrine's practical limitations. The idea of deterrence is that the counterparty is dissuaded from aggression due to an asymmetric balance of power. Yet, Hamas wasn't deterred despite the overwhelming asymmetry in forces vis-a-vis Israel. At best, building up arms in the name of deterrence may buy some time, but out-escalating an adversary is a risky business, particularly when one's own situation is riddled with limitations.

### **A Multipolar Peace?**

The pursuit of and participation in minilaterals reflects both American limitations and aspirations, just as it exploits participants' own ambitions and anxieties. These limitations arise from the fact that the US now confronts realities indicating that its doctrine of "all area dominance" is a fading "entitlement," because many US foreign policy elites can't imagine an alternative world, and so seek to restore (or hold onto) regional primacy. As for participants, Japan seeks to bolster its own standing, taking advantage of evident weakness in the American regional architecture. How Japan does this is a delicate act, given the presence of US troops in Japan, but there are clear signs of Japan's ambitions that draw, to some extent, upon its historical ambitions. History also plays a role in Australia's uncertain perspective. Professor David Walker, a leading authority in the study of Australian perceptions of Asia, spoke of an anxious nation when he described Australia's attitude toward Asia and China in the late 1800s and early 1900s. More recently, Allan Gyngell, former Director-General of the Australian Office of National Assessments (ONA), among other high profile roles, articulated the idea that Australian foreign policy is defined by a fear of abandonment. Australia's AUKUS move can be interpreted through these dual lenses. As for the Philippines, it's clear that while the present leadership seeks American cover, which also suits US containment ambitions, this attitude

is not universally held. In any case, it is hard to see the Americans sending in the Seventh Fleet in response to Philippine grievances over a contested shoal.

Moreover, none of this contributes to a peace that recognizes the existing realities and legitimate interests of the region's largest nation. Similar to how the West sought to ignore Russia and pursue a strategy of containment and destabilization, which presaged the current debacle in Europe, the US and its regional allies are seeking to create a regional apparatus that contains or sidelines China. The European lesson should be that this approach is more likely than not to end in disaster. Worse, none of this prioritizes the crafting of a multipolar regional peace as its core objective. Such a peace requires a broader canvas, which can enable parties to frame security and economic prosperity as co-dependencies, where detente is not subordinated to pursuing zero-sum objectives with an adversarial mindset. The deterrence doctrine is part of the problem, not part of the answer.

There are alternatives, but these rely on the need to create and sustain institutions of stability that buttress economic development and foster conditions for sustained regional peace. This work necessarily amplifies the multilateral, consensus-based modus operandi of much of Asia as an alternative to the either-or ambitions of American Primacy. Such ambitions undermine Asian multipolar institutions and are incompatible with ASEAN centrality. They are anathema to peace in Asia.

# Would AUKUS Help Sustain Peace and Stability in Asia-Pacific?

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In the joint statement that launched AUKUS in September 2021, the leaders of Australia, the US, and the UK vowed to "deepen diplomatic, security, and defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, including by working with partners, to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century." They alleged that the creation of AUKUS would "help sustain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region."<sup>1</sup>

The Asia-Pacific has enjoyed a relatively peaceful environment for more than three decades. Unlike the frequent occurrence of wars and armed conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, there has been no large-scale armed conflict among countries in the Asia-Pacific since the 1990s. Against this background of relative peace and stability, regional countries were able to focus their national strategies on economic development, giving strong momentum to economic growth and continued improvement in the livelihoods of regional people. Aside from outstanding economic and social progress, positive developments have also been witnessed in mutual trust and confidence-building among regional countries through inclusive multilateral security cooperation process as seen in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), and others.

However, the United States, as the only superpower in the world, seems increasingly discontent with such a situation, which it deems more

<sup>1</sup> The White House, *Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS*, September 15, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus/>.

favorable for China's influence, and thus has been firm in diverting the regional focus from fostering economic development and inclusive security cooperation to the so-called "security challenge" posed by China. The US is obviously driven by deepening strategic anxieties over China. In pace with its rapid growth in comprehensive national power, China's influence in international economic, political, and security affairs, especially in the Asia-Pacific, has been expanding. The Lowy Institute's Asia Power Snapshot 2022 reported that the United States has lost influence over China in Southeast Asia in terms of economic relationships, defense networks, diplomatic influence, and cultural influence.<sup>2</sup> Also, the State of Southeast Asia: 2023 Survey Report by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute identified China as the most influential economic and political strategic power in Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup>

It is not surprising, then, when the Biden administration, in its National Security Strategy issued in October 2022, asserted that China is "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it," and has ambitions to "create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world's leading power."<sup>4</sup> Hence, "outcompeting China" becomes the top priority on the US national security agenda. To that end, the Biden administration came up with a threefold strategy toward China, namely "1) to invest in the foundations of our strength at home – our competitiveness, our innovation, our resilience, our democracy, 2) to align our efforts with our network of allies and partners, acting with common purpose and in common cause, and 3) compete responsibly with the PRC to defend our interests and build our vision for the future."<sup>5</sup>

The Biden administration has attached special attention to consolidating the network of its alliances and security alignments in the region. There are already many US-led military alliances or unilateral security alignments, such as the US alliances with Japan, Australia, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the Philippines, as well as security platforms like the Quad. The Biden administration appears to believe that the US could not rely solely on existing arrangements to address perceived challenges from China and needs a platform as an axis or hub in its network of alliances and security alignments. This perhaps is one of the most important considerations behind the creation of AUKUS. Although China was not explicitly mentioned in the official announcement,

2 Susannah Patton and Jack Sato, "Asia Power Snapshot: China and the United States in Southeast Asia," *Lowy Institute*, 20 April, 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/asia-power-snapshot-china-united-states-southeast-asia>.

3 Sharon Seah et al., *The State of Southeast Asia: 2023 Survey Report* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023), <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-State-of-SEA-2023-Final-Digital-V4-09-Feb-2023.pdf>.

4 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, October 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

5 The White House, *National Security Strategy*.

the motivation behind AUKUS is fueled by the perception that China represents a growing regional threat.<sup>6</sup> For the US, "AUKUS is the latest manifestation of the Biden administration's broad multilateral approach, and its ambition to retain American primacy in the region."<sup>7</sup>

The latest developments in the regional situation over the past two years have proved that AUKUS is bringing uncertainties and even tensions to the security landscape of the Asia-Pacific. Indeed, some international analysts observe that AUKUS has become part of the complicating security problems in the region rather than a solution. As put by Natalie Sambhi, founder and executive director of Verve Research, "The overall impression was that AUKUS would destabilize the region, which was already experiencing heightened strategic tension courtesy of the United States and China."<sup>8</sup>

### Driving Major Countries Toward Confrontation

AUKUS is a grouping aimed at dealing with hypothetical threats from China and Russia. The China-US relationship has undergone ups and downs over the past decade. Despite sharp differences, the two countries share common interests. Some positive signs have been seen after the two summit meetings held during the past two years. Yet, the US-driven AUKUS casts a shadow over these slowly recovering relations. China has reiterated its concerns over the "typical Cold War mentality" behind AUKUS, stressing that "the real purpose of AUKUS is to incite bloc division and military confrontation through military cooperation based on exclusive circles."<sup>9</sup>

Many regional countries worry that AUKUS will increase the securitization of international relations in the Asia-Pacific region and encourage its coalescence into two competing blocs.<sup>10</sup> Should such a scenario appear, countries in the region would be in a difficult position of choice. When asked about competition between China and the US in an interview with Al Jazeera, Indonesia's president-elect Prabowo Subianto said, "The fact that we are friends with you doesn't mean we can't be friends with China, India, Russia."<sup>11</sup> As a medium power, Indonesia can insist on its traditional policy of non-alignment under strong pressure, but it may be extremely difficult for smaller countries to follow.

6 Lloyd Cox, Danny Cooper, and Brendon O'Connor, "The AUKUS Umbrella: Australia-US Relations and Strategic Culture in the Shadow of China's Rise," *International Journal* 78, no. 3 (August 30, 2023): 307–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207020231195631>.

7 Amanda Trea Phua, "AUKUS: ASEAN's Hesitant Response," *RSIS Commentary* 2021, no. 157 (October 2021), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CO21157.pdf>.

8 Natalie Sambhi, "Indonesia and AUKUS: Steady Pragmatism at Work," *Asia-Pacific Leadership Network*, September 13, 2023, <https://www.apln.network/analysis/commentaries/indonesia-and-aukus-steady-pragmatism-at-work>.

9 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on April 9, 2024*, April 9, 2024, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/202404/t20240409\\_11278689.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202404/t20240409_11278689.html).

10 Geoffrey Till, "AUKUS: The Optimal Pathway, One Year in," *IDSS Paper* 2024, no. 42 (April 2024), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/IP24042.pdf>.

11 "Indonesia's Prabowo Reiterates 'Asian Way' to Defuse Tension, Al Jazeera Says," *Reuters*, May 12, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesias-prabowo-reiterates-asian-way-defuse-tension-al-jazeera-says-2024-05-12/>.

## Eroding ASEAN Centrality in Regional Affairs

ASEAN's role in driving multilateral security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific has been accepted by the vast majority of regional countries. However, the emergence of the Quad and AUKUS, whether intentionally or not, has posed a serious challenge to ASEAN centrality. The dynamism and significance of non-ASEAN bodies, particularly those in which Australia has invested significant time and political capital, are causing concerns within ASEAN. This situation puts ASEAN's goal of remaining at the center of regionalism in Asia at risk.<sup>12</sup> The Quad and AUKUS are centered around the US due to its paramount military power. "This will present Southeast Asian leaders with a difficult strategic choice: either adapt to the era of coalitions and put ASEAN unity at risk, or sit by as new alignments undermine ASEAN centrality."<sup>13</sup>

## Undermining Multilateral Security Cooperation Process in the Region

The process of multilateral security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, represented by the ASEAN Regional Forum, though at a relatively slow pace and viewed by some Western observers as a "talk-shop," has been exploring a path toward sustainable peace and stability in the region. Significant progress has been made, especially in building an inclusive multilateral security cooperation platform that encompasses almost all countries in the Asia-Pacific. Throughout this process, ASEAN has been at the center and won respect from majority of the regional actors through the ASEAN Way, which is characterized by four principles, namely non-interference, quiet diplomacy, non-use of force, and decision making through consensus. These principles have helped regional countries overcome sharp differences and engage in security cooperation.

An eroded role of ASEAN will inevitably affect the multilateral security process. Commenting on the Quad and AUKUS, Professor Nick Bisley at La Trobe University, Australia, stated, "There is a good chance that the moves in the region that Australia has been at the heart of will mark the end of post-Cold War security multilateralism in Asia. The casting aside of the more inclusive forms of security cooperation, and the focus on exclusive mechanisms that are intended to shape great power

12 Nick Bisley, "Asia's Regional Security Architecture: An Australian Perspective," *ISEAS Perspective* 2022, no. 49 (May 2022), [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2022\\_49.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ISEAS_Perspective_2022_49.pdf).

13 Zack Cooper, "The Era of Coalitions: The Shifting Nature of Alignments in Asia," *ISEAS Perspective* 2023, no. 7 (February 2023), [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2023\\_7.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ISEAS_Perspective_2023_7.pdf).

competition and not to prevent it, reflect the grim reality of a region in which war is once again in the realm of the thinkable."<sup>14</sup>

### Endangering the Extremely Fragile International Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime

James M. Acton, Co-Director of the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, opined that "the nonproliferation implications of the AUKUS submarine deal are both negative and serious."<sup>15</sup> The international nuclear non-proliferation regime has been under serious tests in the past three decades, especially after the nuclear tests and weaponization conducted by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), India, and Pakistan since the late 1990s. Whether other non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWSs) would follow suit haunts international society. Some politicians and scholars in countries like Japan and the ROK have openly voiced an ardent desire for nuclear armament.

Under the framework of AUKUS, the US and the UK would support Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines. This move violates the commitments the three countries made as signatories of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and might open a Pandora's Box, stimulating a new cycle of nuclear proliferation. "A more serious concern is the risk of non-nuclear-weapon states using the cover of acquiring nuclear-powered submarines as a covert route to nuclear weapons."<sup>16</sup> Some countries with both the capability and intention may be unable to resist the temptation of starting nuclear weapon programs under the pretense of developing nuclear-powered submarines or airplanes. "While Australia is currently one of the rare NNWSs to seek nuclear-powered submarines – Brazil being another – it is not unthinkable that others, such as ROK or Japan, might more seriously pursue such capabilities further into the future."<sup>17</sup>

The possibility of nuclear proliferation brought about by the AUKUS deal has given rise to global anxiety. Many countries have vented their fears publicly that Australia's decision on the submarines could exacerbate nuclear proliferation. The Indonesian Foreign Ministry stated on September 17, 2021, that "Indonesia takes note cautiously of the Australian Government's decision to acquire nuclear-powered

14 Bisley, "Asia's Regional Security Architecture."

15 James M. Acton, "Why the AUKUS Submarine Deal Is Bad for Nonproliferation—And What to Do About It," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 21, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2021/09/why-the-aukus-submarine-deal-is-bad-for-nonproliferationand-what-to-do-about-it?lang=en>.

16 Ian Storey and William Choong, "The AUKUS Announcement and Southeast Asia: An Assessment of Regional Responses and Concerns," *ISEAS Perspective* 2023, no. 23 (March 2023), [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2023\\_23.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2023_23.pdf).

17 Alvin Chew and Sarah Teo, "AUKUS and the Non-Proliferation Debate," *IDSS Paper* 2022, no. 55 (October 2022), <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/IP22055-Chew-Teo-masthead-final.pdf>.

submarines; Indonesia is deeply concerned over the continuing arms race and power projection in the region; Indonesia stresses the importance of Australia's commitment to continue meeting all of its nuclear non-proliferation obligations."<sup>18</sup> Replying to the queries on Vietnam's stance on AUKUS, Vietnamese foreign ministry spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang emphasized, "The nuclear energy must be developed and used for peaceful purposes and serve socio-economic development, ensuring safety for humans and the environment."<sup>19</sup> In a statement published on March 14, 2023, Malaysia reiterated the importance of all parties within and beyond AUKUS to "fully respect and comply with the existing Malaysia's national regime in relation to the operation of nuclear-powered submarines in our waters."<sup>20</sup>

### **Stimulating an Arms Race**

During the Cold War, the fierce arms race between the US and the USSR led to worldwide tension. The AUKUS deal is expected to affect the balance of military power in the region, sparking concerns about a potential arms race in the Asia-Pacific. Indonesia has expressed concern over "the continuing arms race and power projection in the region."<sup>21</sup> While the timing of an arms race is uncertain, countries with security disputes involving AUKUS member countries may take concrete measures to address possible security risks brought about by AUKUS.

### **China's Potential Response to AUKUS**

China has been closely observing developments related to AUKUS and is preparing to address challenges to its core national interests. China intends to work with the international community on various aspects to promote peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific and globally. Here are the approaches China can take to achieve these goals:

#### ***Fostering regional security cooperation processes***

The existence of military alliances and other forms of exclusive security alignment will inevitably give rise to mutual suspicions and even confrontations between aligned and non-aligned countries. As agreed by many regional countries, future peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific cannot be achieved without inclusive multilateral cooperation that can

18 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, *Statement on Australia's Nuclear-Powered Submarines Program*, September 17, 2021, [https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/2937/siaran\\_pers/statement-on-australias-nuclear-powered-submarines-program](https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/2937/siaran_pers/statement-on-australias-nuclear-powered-submarines-program).

19 Tu Anh, "Vietnam Spells out Stance on AUKUS," *Hanoi Times*, September 23, 2021, <https://hanoitimes.vn/vietnam-spells-out-stance-on-aucus-318802.html>.

20 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, *Enhanced Trilateral Security Partnership Between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America (AUKUS)*, March 14, 2023, <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/-/enhanced-trilateral-security-partnership-between-australia-the-united-kingdom-and-the-united-states-of-america-aucus->.

21 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, *Statement*.



build confidence, trust, and even help defuse hostilities and tensions among regional countries.

### ***Supporting ASEAN centrality in regional security***

In view of the complexities involved in Asia-Pacific security, ASEAN is the only entity acceptable to almost all stakeholders in the region, making its centrality in regional security indispensable. However, the erosion of ASEAN centrality by AUKUS has brought this into a critical state that needs strong support. By consistently backing ASEAN centrality, China can not only show itself as a responsible country in preserving regional peace and stability, but also win respect from ASEAN countries.

### ***Keeping close communications and consultations on the developments of AUKUS with regional countries***

The US-led AUKUS and other exclusive security alignments pose serious risks to regional stability. For assorted reasons, some regional countries may fail to understand the extent of the danger. Thus, it is of immense importance for China and other regional countries to engage in serious dialogue on the issue.

### ***Strengthening the NPT regime and preventing nuclear proliferation***

The AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine deal, involving two nuclear-weapon states and one NNWS, clearly violates the commitments they made as members of the NPT. Other NPT member countries have the legitimate right to ask for transparency and relevant regulatory measures to ensure the NPT regime is kept intact. In this regard, installing a proper and effective monitoring procedure is critical.

### ***Properly handling territorial and maritime disputes with neighboring countries***

Due to historical and other realistic reasons, there are some disputes between China and neighboring countries, and the US has been exploiting these disputes to amplify the so-called "China threat." Effective measures are needed to end the cycle of tensions, calling for strategic wisdom from both China and relevant countries.

*Last but not least, maintaining the momentum of improvement in China-US relations*

The driving force behind AUKUS is the US. As long as a stable and predictable bilateral relationship is kept, the future development of AUKUS and its negative impacts can be better controlled. This calls for strategic communications that can effectively manage and control existing and potential disputes between China and the US.

In short, AUKUS and other US-led exclusive security alignments pose realistic and potential risks to peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific. China will join hands with the international community to meet the challenges ahead.

# Decoding the Evolving Security Architecture in Asia-Pacific

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## Introduction

The Asia-Pacific region is characterized by cooperation, where geopolitical interests, trade, commerce, and environmental challenges converge. It is a critical component of the global supply chains, accounting for two-thirds of the world's economic growth, 60% of global GDP, and a strong source and destination for global foreign direct investment (FDI). The region's vital maritime routes further enhance its importance, as they are indispensable for global commerce and energy supply infrastructure. The region also possesses interconnected historical heritages, influenced by a variety of cultures, religions, ethnicities, and social values, all of which shape interactions and perspectives.

However, the return of tense bloc politics and escalation, exemplified by US-led military alliances like AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), as well as an invitation for Japan to join AUKUS, termed "JAUKUS," are worrisome developments. Since 2011, when then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced the "Pivot to Asia," the US has intensified efforts aimed at containing China. This involved forming a coalition of "like-minded" countries through extended

military cooperation and magnifying trivial issues to constrain China. In contrast, China has always played an active role in maintaining regional and global peace, emphasizing win-win cooperation over a zero-sum perspective. This research paper analyzes the current geopolitical and security landscape of the Asia-Pacific region, with a focus on East Asia and relevant evolving minilateral groupings, and explores potential options for China in maintaining peace and stability amidst great power competition and contradictions.

### **Evolving Strategic and Security Landscape in the Asia-Pacific Region**

Recognizing the significance of East Asia, then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton unveiled the "Pivot to Asia" strategy on October 11, 2011, describing the region as key to developing a regional economic and security architecture.<sup>1</sup> In Southeast Asia, a dominant manifestation of the pivot included developing relations and reviving close links with the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore, as well as India in the sub-continent. The pivot had several constituents, including a shift in US foreign policy from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific, later refined as the "Indo-Pacific." It also included the relocation of naval assets, redeployment of US forces to new locations, and formation treaties with allies and partners in the region.

The implementation of the "Pivot to Asia" strategy, along with military posturing and the basing of forces in China's neighborhood, has created anxiety within China. Consequently, the "Pivot to Asia" appears to be a self-fulfilling US prophecy. With the US depicting China as a competitor rather than a partner and keeping "China threat" theory alive, China is incentivized to take defensive countermeasures, on which the US seems to be "doubling down" with an even larger military presence in the region, ultimately leading to a tense, expensive geopolitical situation for all involved.

The active aspects of "China containment" are aptly exemplified by offensive military doctrines, posturing, and joint military exercises conducted by the US and its regional allies. Initiatives like AUKUS, the Quad, and the "Indo-Pacific strategy" are testimony to the involvement of regional alliances of "like-minded" countries built to contain China. The establishment of AUKUS, a security alliance comprising Australia, the UK, and the US, is expected to significantly reshape the security

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<sup>1</sup> Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

framework in the Asia-Pacific region for the foreseeable future. Several new initiatives and defense agreements amongst member countries are being planned to maintain the balance of power and constrain China. The impact and outcomes of the AUKUS alliance's development will heavily depend on its integration with current US alliance agreements in the region and coordination with other regional frameworks, such as the Quad.

The evolving security landscape is rapidly becoming a security dilemma, primarily driven by the narrative of the "China threat" spearheaded by the US and its allies. This stratagem magnifies trivial issues that China has traditionally managed peacefully with regional partners. US alliance obligations are in turn overemphasized, creating a false sense of threat to justify the balance of power obligations against China's peaceful development efforts.

### **Great Power Competition in the Asia-Pacific and India's Stance**

The US National Security Strategy (NSS) 2017 formalized a fundamental shift in US policy toward China. After almost two decades of involvement in the War on Terror (WoT),<sup>2</sup> the US declared competition with and containment of China as an explicit national security priority. President Biden's long-awaited NSS 2022 even advanced the notion of competition with China by building an alliance of "like-minded" countries in the region.<sup>3</sup> Comparative analyses between the two documents underscore China's prominence in US policy calculus. In the US NSS 2017, China was mentioned 33 times, while in the US NSS 2022, it was mentioned 53 times. This indicates the Biden administration's intention to pursue a zero-sum game and a containment protocol.

Another important aspect is India's motivation to become part of US-led alliances in the "Indo-Pacific" by strengthening ties with the US, Japan, Australia, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Such a venture is aimed at getting India closer to the US alliance for the containment of China. Among these countries, Japan and Australia have been proactive in fulfilling their alliance obligations. Japan has increased its defense cooperation with both Australia and India, while Australia has increased its defense cooperation with Japan, India, and South Korea. Like the United States, all these countries prefer both bilateral relationships and multilateral forums. The US has been at the forefront in posturing unilateral

2 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 18, 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

3 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, October 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

defense cooperation with and amongst Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand, with invitations also extended to select others like India and Indonesia.

Indian strategists recognize that China is reliant on the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) passing through the Indian Ocean, where India enjoys an advantageous geographic position. The recent upgrading of naval bases in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as well as Lakshadweep fits into India's strategy of dominating SLOCs. India considers the Quad as another strategic opportunity provided by the US to enhance its regional role. The alliance fits well within the context of China containment policies, a stance that India has willingly embraced. While other nations of the Quad and the broader "Indo-Pacific" region may have interests in the Pacific Ocean, India is considered a lynchpin in fulfilling a greater role in both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. India has therefore embarked on an ambitious plan of engaging at diplomatic and military levels with the countries of the "Indo-Pacific" and participating in US-led initiatives aimed at containing China, while still cooperating with China to draw economic benefits as current bilateral trade volume is beyond 130 billion USD. In essence, India is projecting itself as a balancing actor, maintaining a strategic equilibrium between the US and China to enhance relevance and stature on the global stage.

### **Recent Developments and Implications of Minilateral Institutions**

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's desire to engage Japan in the growing number of US-led regional security frameworks has bolstered Tokyo's stance. This strengthens Japan's alliance with Washington and its partnerships with other nations, marking a crucial component of its regional strategy amidst the evolving security landscape.

The United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia desire collaboration with Japan on cutting-edge technological initiatives within the trilateral AUKUS security arrangements, with the objective of enhancing deterrence capabilities against China. The AUKUS defense ministers have expressed their willingness to include Japan in Pillar II of the security pact, which specifically deals with cutting-edge technology such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, submarine construction, and hypersonic weapons. The group expressed a commitment to

providing sophisticated military capabilities to their armed forces and emphasized that involving "like-minded" partners in Pillar II will further enhance this endeavor.<sup>4</sup>

AUKUS was formed under the premise of the "China challenge" as a deterrent against China in the Asia-Pacific region. Similarly, the Quad's vision, as outlined during its maiden summit in March 2021, acknowledges each member country's peculiarities and seeks to build on areas of convergence against China. While the Quad and AUKUS address common security challenges faced by alliance partners, AUKUS focuses on "hard power" in the maritime domain, and the Quad complements other domains including intelligence, reorienting value chains of defense industrial bases, and emerging technologies with military applications. The US-Japan-Philippines trilateral summit held in Washington on April 10, 2024, is another significant development that paved the way for joint military exercises and defense collaborations, underscoring the pivotal roles of Japan and the Philippines in fulfilling US alliance obligations.

### **Strategic Response by China for Enduring Peace and Stability**

In the evolving landscape characterized by US-led alliances fostering zero-sum dynamics and bloc politics, China has been pragmatically maintaining a balanced approach that encourages constructive engagement with all stakeholders.

To reach multiple audiences, China should continue to organize joint research projects, conferences, seminars, and talk shows, ensuring wider publicity on major international media platforms in multiple languages. This approach also encompasses leveraging organizations including the UN, as well as regional organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and BRICS. By continuing to actively engage with these organizations, China can demonstrate its soft power and convey its benign intent for common development and the creation of a community with a prosperous shared future. White papers, like those issued on "China's Peaceful Development" and "Belt and Road Initiative," also serve as strong positive communication tools.

4 Demetri Sevastopulo, "US, UK and Australia Say Japan Could Join Part of AUKUS Pact," *Financial Times*, April 8, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/f93e7d2f-5d60-4f77-88f1-96fc6115378>.

In a period of heightened tensions, robust engagement between China, the US, and regional countries at bilateral diplomatic and military levels is crucial. Through military exchanges and joint military exercises, countries can be partners in trying to solve major international issues, particularly those concerning non-traditional security issues. Both China and the US must develop a comprehensive understanding of their relationship, following a principle of "managing differences for common development," avoiding confrontation, and taking steps toward building trust. China should continue to proactively engage with regional neighbors, especially those vital for the US "Indo-Pacific strategy," to keep communication lines open and incentivize participation in regional development and investment projects.



Youth

Voices



# Navigating AUKUS Pillar II: China's Strategic Responses in Asia-Pacific

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In recent years, the most notable shift in the Asia-Pacific region has been strategic realignments, especially with the establishment of AUKUS (a trilateral security partnership among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among the United States, Japan, Australia, and India). Since their inception, the enhanced cooperation amongst member states has been focused on containing China's influence in the region.

As of mid-2024, the Quad and AUKUS have undertaken various initiatives. The Quad continues to broaden its scope beyond security concerns, emphasizing a multidimensional partnership that includes economic and technological aspects. The organization also works on collaborative infrastructure projects that enhance connectivity within the Asia-Pacific region. These projects are often seen as a counterbalance to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aiming to provide alternative financing and implementation models.

In contrast with the Quad, AUKUS represents a more significant shift in regional security dynamics. AUKUS has a specific and focused approach, primarily centering on military and technological cooperation, whereas the Quad has a broader scope that includes diplomatic, economic, and environmental aspects. AUKUS involves two Pacific powers and a European country, focusing more on direct defense ties and capabilities. In contrast, the Quad includes two Asian powers (India and Japan), which broaden its geopolitical footprint and relevance in Asian geopolitics. AUKUS is seen as more directly confrontational toward China, especially with the provision of nuclear submarines to Australia. AUKUS marks a shift in US global strategy,

whereby the US redistributes forces by empowering allied military capabilities around the Asia-Pacific (APAC). The Quad, while also a counter to China, operates more subtly.

Currently, the concept of expanding AUKUS is gaining support in the US, where policymakers describe it as an open and flexible platform that could include more countries in the future by enhancing collaboration on military innovation and advancing shared security interests, as well as deepening technological, economic, and climate cooperation in the Asia-Pacific.

This vision presents AUKUS as a complementary force to the existing regional architecture. While the US considers China a threat in the Asia-Pacific, many East Asian nations do not share this view. However, Japan has recently demonstrated a pronounced interest in participating in Pillar II projects under the AUKUS framework, highlighting its technological capabilities with submarines and aircraft. Pillar II of AUKUS is designed to facilitate the delivery and sharing of advanced military technologies among its partners, including hypersonic, artificial intelligence (AI), and cyber technologies. Meanwhile, Pillar I focuses on providing Australia with nuclear-powered attack submarines.

AUKUS and the Quad states view Japan as a reliable partner alongside the US and Australia. Additionally, Japan is actively enhancing its diplomatic and security relations with India, the Philippines, South Korea, and the UK. During a US-Japan summit in April 2024, it was announced that the three AUKUS partners would explore opportunities for cooperation with Japan on advanced capability projects under AUKUS Pillar II. Later, the Secretary of National Defense of the Philippines Gilberto Teodoro and Australian Defense Minister Richard Marles met with Japanese Defense Minister Minoru Kihara and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in Hawaii, where they reaffirmed the potential involvement of Japan in these projects.

More recently, US Senator Jim Risch, with other members of the Foreign Relations Committee, introduced the "Coordinating AUKUS Engagement with Japan Act." This act facilitates the implementation of the AUKUS policy by instructing the designated AUKUS coordinators within the US Departments of State and Defense to collaborate with Japan. They are tasked with consulting with their counterparts in the UK and Australia at a technical level to better comprehend how Japan can enhance the partnership and identify the necessary steps for Japan to swiftly and

effectively participate in AUKUS advanced technology projects. Japan's involvement would enhance the technological and strategic depth of AUKUS initiatives, as a key component of AUKUS is improving interoperability of armed forces through joint training exercises and enhanced information sharing.

Additionally, a spokesperson for the British Defense Ministry communicated to the Korean Service of Voice of America (VOA) on May 2 that the UK is actively looking to involve allies and close partners as development on AUKUS Pillar II continues. The UK believes that South Korea is a country with deeply impressive technology, and South Korea has also confirmed its ongoing discussions to join the AUKUS defense partnership. Meanwhile, New Zealand, known for its nuclear-free policy, is contemplating engagement in Pillar II of AUKUS. Although the decision-making process is still nascent, this engagement could be instrumental in aligning strategic interests across the broader Asia-Pacific. AUKUS has also stimulated other strategic considerations.

AUKUS Pillar II represents a new reality and has explicitly signaled its intent to deter China militarily. The responses of regional states to AUKUS are influenced by concerns over potential disruptions to regional stability and their strategic relationships with both the US and China. Many policymakers and analysts have expressed concerns that AUKUS could potentially trigger an arms race and pose additional challenges to regional stability. Furthermore, there are uncertainties surrounding the implementation of AUKUS, which cast doubt on the balance of power and the deterrent effects it might achieve. Over time, more regional actors, including middle powers and smaller states, might find themselves aligning with AUKUS through partnerships or on an issue-by-issue basis.

AUKUS expansion has potential consequences for China. The primary implication for China is containment, especially if it includes other "like-minded" nations in the region or global players interested in Asia-Pacific security. This perception could exacerbate tensions and lead to a more confrontational regional security environment.

Secondly, AUKUS focuses on advanced technology sharing and development, including areas like AI, cyber capabilities, and underwater systems, which could shift regional military balances. The inclusion of advanced submarine technology and other military assets significantly boosts the military capabilities of member countries, potentially prompting China to accelerate its own military modernization and advancements in response.

Diplomatically, as AUKUS expands, it could complicate Beijing's efforts to foster stronger bilateral relationships in the region and could lead to a polarization where several countries might have to choose between aligning with China or AUKUS strategies.

AUKUS expansion could also have indirect economic repercussions for China, particularly if heightened security concerns disrupt trade routes or lead to increased military expenditures among Asia-Pacific nations. Additionally, AUKUS could lead to tighter restrictions or scrutiny over technological and trade flows, particularly in dual-use technologies, affecting China's economic engagements and technology acquisitions.

As the strategic competition between the US and China intensifies, the strategic landscape of the Asia-Pacific is likely to become increasingly divided and competitive. Malaysia and other littoral states might explore novel alignments and partnerships. One example mechanism is the Five Power Defense Agreement (FPDA) among the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Malaysia. This and other mechanisms could strengthen existing security alliances and partnerships that exclude China, such as the Quad. This development could lead to a more divided regional order, with China on one side and AUKUS/Quad-aligned countries on the other.

### **Possible Strategic Response by China**

China has already expressed deep concerns and strong opposition to the AUKUS pact, as it views the alliance as fundamentally aimed at promoting containment and military confrontation. China's response to the expansion of AUKUS should be strategic, multifaceted, and aimed at both safeguarding its national interests and maintaining regional stability. Rather than resorting to confrontation, engaging in constructive dialogue with stakeholders is essential to address concerns and find common ground. Here are several suggested approaches that China might consider:

- China could increase diplomatic efforts to engage with AUKUS members and other regional stakeholders. This includes reinforcing diplomatic ties, utilizing multilateral platforms for dialogue, engaging in multilateral forums and initiatives to address common challenges such as maritime security and environmental issues, and promoting a narrative that emphasizes peace and cooperation.

- In response to AUKUS, China could consider bolstering relationships with neighboring countries and regional organizations. By deepening economic, political, and security ties with ASEAN, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and other groups, China can cultivate a network of supportive relationships that may act as a counterbalance to the influence of AUKUS. China may enhance its strategic partnerships with other regional players and potentially increase support to countries less aligned with the West. This could also include boosting its participation and influence in multinational organizations where it has leverage, such as the SCO and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).
- The focus on advanced technologies by AUKUS and the Quad ensures that member states maintain a competitive edge in critical areas of military and economic development. It is crucial for China to responsibly advance its own military capabilities and technologies. China must strengthen its military capabilities to deter perceived threats. This includes investing in areas like cyber defense, space, AI, and naval power. Meanwhile, it is vital that China's military modernization is only seen as defensive. Participating in arms control discussions, hosting military-to-military talks, and engaging in confidence-building measures (CBMs) with neighboring countries could help alleviate regional fears.
- Although AUKUS insists its collaboration on nuclear-powered submarines for Australia will not include nuclear arms, there are concerns about nuclear proliferation in the region. China might use these concerns to leverage its position in international forums and argue against the expansion of such technologies, citing risks to regional stability.
- China's economic influence in fostering regional integration is unmistakable, as evidenced by its extensive investments, trade agreements, and infrastructure projects across Asia. Projects like BRI, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and China's bilateral trade agreements with various Asian nations underscore China's commitment to advancing regional integration through economic means, positioning it as a key driver of economic cooperation and development in the region. Therefore, leveraging its massive economy, China could promote regional economic integration further to create a stabilizing effect.
- Actively seeking resolutions to territorial and maritime disputes in the South

China Sea could significantly reduce regional tensions. Initiatives for joint development, adherence to international law, and participation in conflict resolution mechanisms demonstrate China's commitment to peaceful coexistence.

- China should work on presenting and communicating its policies and actions in a way that counters negative portrayals. Engaging international media, think tanks, and public diplomacy initiatives could help improve China's image and explain its policies more effectively to a global audience.
- Enhancing its soft power through cultural exchanges, educational programs, humanitarian aid, and other soft diplomacy tools could help improve China's standing and influence. There is a need to engage in public diplomacy initiatives to shape a positive image and narrative to promote China's vision of regional cooperation and stability. For China to bolster its technological innovation and competitiveness, there is a pressing need to invest significantly in research and development initiatives.
- China may also start a regional dialogue including ASEAN states and AUKUS partners to mitigate tensions and build trust, potentially within forums like the ASEAN Regional Forum or East Asia Summit. By championing inclusive and cooperative initiatives that address the underlying security challenges of the region, countries can effectively counterbalance the influence of AUKUS and the Quad.

AUKUS and the Quad serve to disturb regional balance and challenge China's presence in the region, albeit through different mechanisms, the Quad through a broader and somewhat softer strategy, and AUKUS through direct military enhancement and expansion. Countering AUKUS and the Quad requires a multifaceted approach that prioritizes diplomatic dialogue, multilateral cooperation, and inclusive regional frameworks. By adopting a holistic strategy that combines these elements, China can effectively respond to the challenges posed by the expansion of AUKUS, maintain its strategic interests, and contribute to long-term regional stability.

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