

Aukus security pact poses challenges to other powers

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The Australia-United Kingdom-United States (Aukus) security pact has caused ripple effects across oceans and continents. Not only will the trilateral security partnership provoke China, but it will likely further divide Southeast Asia and overshadow Asean-centred cooperative vehicles, such as the East Asia Summit. Beyond these concerns, the Aukus deal to share Anglo-American nuclear technology to enable Australia's acquisition of eight nuclear-powered submarines over two decades poses challenges to other major powers, particularly the European Union and its key members as well as Japan.

For the EU and its “strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, Aukus is a clear challenge. While both Aukus and the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy intend to uphold the rules-based liberal international order, their conceptualisation is fundamentally different. Aukus is more confrontational vis-à-vis China, whereas the EU plan is more cooperative and broad-based, emphasising “an open and fair environment for trade and investment” and an agenda for climate change and connectivity.

Aukus is underpinned by Australia’s conflict with China where it is hard to gauge who is most at fault. Australia started it by alleging that China originated the coronavirus pandemic but Beijing then responded by bullying the Australians with a tariff and trade war. Australia consequently cannot back down if it wants to maintain credibility and resolve, while China cannot afford to back off for the same reason. The tense Beijing-Canberra relationship is the main driver of Aukus. But the EU’s engagement is more about the Indo-Pacific’s vital nexus of security and prosperity, not just about China.

Moreover, Aukus comes on the heels of Brexit, whereby the UK essentially snubbed the EU by leaving the bloc after nearly 50 years of membership. By undermining the European Project and the rules-based liberal international order — of which the EU is its crowning achievement — Brexit’s impact has been intensified by Aukus. The maintenance of the rules-based international order, which is a primary objective of the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy, will be harder because the Aukus security partnership is aimed directly at China’s role and expansionist aims.

For the major EU members, Aukus particularly enflames the French by not just hijacking a submarines procurement deal but also by posing a frontal diplomatic and defence affront on France. French relations with the three Aukus countries are likely to encounter friction, thereby complicating EU strategic engagements with Canberra, London, and Washington. It will be more difficult to maintain the EU’s uniformity in strategy and policy in the Indo-Pacific because France, which has the most forward-deployed maritime capabilities among EU members, will likely be an outlier in its criticism of and opposition to Aukus.

In turn, Germany’s work as part of the EU’s Indo-Pacific strategy will be more daunting for several

reasons. First, the French will not look upon Aukus amicably in a compatible and accommodating fashion. France's ire may tilt the EU to become sceptical, if not oppositional, towards Aukus. Second, as Aukus will raise geopolitical tensions in view of China's agitation due to the Anglo-American-Australian amalgamation, the strategic environment for Germany may heat up.

In addition, projecting German interests through the EU's Indo-Pacific framework will face more limitations because Aukus has trumped and outflanked the EU. As a result, Germany may be forced to carve out more of its own strategic autonomy and direction above and beyond the EU.

Japan, an instigator and key member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("the Quad") with Australia, India and the US, is in the same boat as Germany. As Aukus takes China to task, the pact exacerbates geopolitical tensions in Japan's near-abroad. Lowering tensions should be what Tokyo wants but the geopolitical trendlines are going the other way towards greater rivalry and confrontation, particularly between Australia and the US against China.

Further, as it has been provoked, China may become more aggressive and provocative in turn. It is difficult to see China more at ease and at peace after the Aukus agreement. What Beijing will do exactly is hard to fathom but its bristled actions will likely be hard and tough for nearby neighbours like Japan.

Aukus also is likely to dilute the Quad's weight and impact because it will divert attention and resources from Australia and the US more into the new geostrategic triad and away from Japan. It does not mean the Quad will cease to exist but more that the four-member grouping will be weaker and less relevant than in the recent past. For Japan, Aukus has presented yet another compelling, if unfortunate, rationale for Tokyo to stand up for itself and come into its own more than at anytime since the Second World War. Japan may have to bite the bullet and set out a more autonomous geostrategic path, less reliant on the US security guarantee.

In the broad sweep of global peace and conflict, Aukus profoundly shifts geostrategy to focus overwhelming on sea power rather than land power. China, with Russia to a lesser extent, is the dominant and resurgent land power on the Asian landmass. Encircled and being contained by the three Aukus maritime powers — Australia, the UK and the US are essentially island countries — China will likely respond correspondingly. It has already embarked on a substantial build-up of maritime capabilities, including the construction of multiple aircraft carriers and the seizure and weaponisation of artificial islands in the South China Sea.

Aukus further provides an incentive for a tighter axis between Beijing and Moscow. China and Russia to a lesser extent will see Aukus as a looming threat and danger. The new security pact, in other words, is a big gamble for the three partners. Australia gets most out of it as a vehicle to stand up to China, while the UK's benefit beyond a proactive role in the Indo-Pacific remains unclear. For the US, Aukus will likely indicate to major allies, such as Japan, France and Germany, let alone the whole EU, that US reliability as a security partner is not what it used to be.

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