

INDIA'S STANCE ON AUKUS: AN APPRAISAL

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The inking of the AUKUS, a trilateral security pact on September 15, 2021 among Australia, the UK and the US, without Indian inclusion has surprised many experts. The AUKUS is designed to contain China. The AUKUS for the first time will be building nuclear-powered submarines which means Canberra will be using technologies provided by Washington. Some analysts are of the view that the AUKUS pact covering Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other sophisticated technologies appear to be the AUKUS members' biggest defence partnership in recent decades.¹ In such circumstances, the non-inclusion of India, a strategic ally of the US in the containment of China from the pact puts New Delhi in a deep quandary. Within India, among the analysts, there have been mixed feelings as far as the AUKUS is concerned.

Some experts who view Australia as a crucial ally of the Quad Quadrilateral Security Dialogue are content with the provision of top-quality nuclear submarine technology from the US and the UK to Canberra, bolstering Australian position in the Indo-Pacific to counter China. However, others regard the AUKUS as the betrayal of the US with France to whom New Delhi considers as a crucial partner in the Indian Ocean. Critics have strong remonstrations on the pact arguing that the US should have taken France in confidence before signing the pact. Critics further reiterate that "It would have

¹ "Aukus: UK, US and Australia launch pact to counter China", *BBC*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-58564837>

prevented an unseemly spat between friends, all big players in the Indo-Pacific region.”² Opponents of the pact also say that the members of the AUKUS played a double game with France a member of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partner and the same duplicity is round the corner with India.

Indian officials view the AUKUS from a different prism, their apprehensions over the pact has been serious, the deal is highly likely to trigger a crowding of nuclear attack submarines (SSNs/submersible ship nuclear) in the Eastern Indian Ocean, diminishing New Delhi's conventional underwater capability and regional supremacy. There is a prevailing speculation within India that New Delhi ought to seek France help concerning nuclear submarines. The sceptics say that Canberra's nuclear submarine capability is likely to surpass India's own in coming years. Indian officials confer that Australia ought to reassess its strategic environment.³

The AUKUS has been causing a great deal of rift and fissure among the US allies, overshadowing the role of Quad. Harsh Vardhan Shringla, Indian Foreign Secretary states that the deal is "neither relevant to the Quad nor will it have any impact on its functioning."⁴ New Delhi tends to see Quad as an Asian North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) but the former does not have any commitment to collective security. A recent summit of Quad, underlined cooperation on climate change, COVID-19 vaccine distribution, technology, and science. The summit remained absolved of any immediate responsibility to accelerate anti-China security framework. Unlike, Quad, the AUKUS is a security pact; the non-inclusion of India intensifies New Delhi's security dilemma vis-à-vis China.⁵

The AUKUS is believed to have set a new precedent for sharing US technology and material of nuclear-powered submarines with other countries. The US sharing powered submarines with allies will compel China to follow the same trajectory of providing powered submarines to its allies probably will further escalate New Delhi's security dilemma in the region. The US, under the Non-proliferation Treaty NPT offered technology to a state that is a non-nuclear-weapon state (NNWS). China to some experts might offer it to non-NPT, nuclear-armed states that do not have full-scope safeguards arrangements with the International Atomic Energy Agency IAEA.⁶

² Abhijit Singh, "India is not a bystander in the AUKUS saga" *ORF*, September 25, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-is-not-a-bystander-in-the-aukus-saga/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Manjari Chatterjee Miller, "The Quad, AUKUS, and India's Dilemmas", *Council on Foreign Relations*. October 13, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/article/quad-aukus-and-indias-dilemmas>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Manpreet SETHI "AUKUS from an Indian perspective", *APLN*, September 29, 2021 <https://www.apln.network/analysis/commentaries/aukus-from-an-indian-perspective>

Sharing powered submarines and technologies in the great power competition between the US and China will, arguably, put India in a disadvantageous position. While the AUKUS has enraged France, the pact has scuttled the US\$80-billion French-Australian submarine deal. Paris might find new partners in the region in a bid to sell the powered submarines.⁷ The nuclear-powered submarine race is likely to engulf the whole region emanating further security challenges for India in the near future. It is a matter of grave concern for the region; some western nations have war-oriented economies. They flourish enormously by selling expensive weapon systems to non-western countries. The oceans and seas of Asia will ostensibly become a battlefield for menacing warships and submarines threatening the whole region.⁸

The AUKUS seems to be posing a grave threat to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations ASEAN that ultimately disturbs India's Act East Policy ACT. ACT is aimed at bolstering economic ties, strategic and cultural relations with ASEAN. Against the backdrop of this, Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob expressed his fear that the AUKUS would "provoke other powers to act more aggressively in the region, especially in the South China Sea."⁹ Within ASEAN some countries under tutelage of the US have welcomed the pact while those under Chinese umbrella have the serious reservations on the pact. The AUKUS has generated new security challenges for many of the ASEAN members indirectly causing troubles for Indian partners.¹⁰

After abandoning India in the mess of Afghanistan, the non-inclusion of New Delhi in the AUKUS is reckoned to be yet another betrayal of the US. The military pact, arguably, minimizes the role of Quad and India. More worrisomely, the pact was inked by three English speaking countries deceived France a NATO ally of the US indeed puts other non-English speaking countries India and Japan in deep consternations. In short, after Afghanistan's conundrum, the AUKUS has further intensified New Delhi's worries in the prevailing geopolitical landscape of the region.

⁷ Sudheendra Kulkarni, "Quad, AUKUS, SAARC... and a divided Asia". *Tribune India News Service*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/quad-aucus-saarc%E2%80%A6-and-a-divided-asia-315269>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Laura Southgate, "AUKUS: The View from ASEAN", *The Diplomat*, September 23, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/aukus-the-view-from-asean/>

¹⁰ Ibid.