

AUKUS, THE SOUTH CHINA SEA DISPUTE AND REGIONAL PEACE AND STABILITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Rationalising the establishment of AUKUS

In September 2021, the United States, the UK and Australia announced the establishment of an alliance known as AUKUS, regrouping ‘three like-minded’ countries. This came immediately after Australia ended its nuclear submarine deal with France for reasons that continuing with the project would not be in the interest of Australia. There is a perception that the formation of AUKUS aims at undermining China and countering its assertiveness in the region, especially in the South China Sea, an area of dispute between several countries in the region, including China. The US and its AUKUS allies denied that this is the reason behind the formation of AUKUS. In the region itself, AUKUS received mixed reactions, like that of an earlier attempt by QUAD countries in establishing yet another ‘grouping’ of like-minded countries to promote the ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept. This was also perceived by some as an attempt to ‘contain’ China, although quite different from AUKUS, the presence of India brought a moderating influence. What AUKUS will do to achieve its objectives, and how it will affect regional peace and stability is watched with great concern.

Joining AUKUS is a landmark decision for Australia for many reasons. Practically, it is said that AUKUS will help Australia fill up the “capability gap” that US could provide, which presumably the French could not. For Australia, the US is a more reliable and trusted partner in matters of national security and sovereignty. Moreover, AUKUS will complement the existing partnership between the three countries whose shared values and interests are well known. At the same time, Australia’s membership may serve to elevate Australia’s position to an equal partner, and not merely a ‘faithful ally’ of the US as perceived by some. It is now co-opted into a ‘league’ of powers responsible for maintaining peace, stability and security in the Indo-Pacific. But the decision has also implications for regional stability, especially for the ASEAN region.

For many years now, Britain has lost much of its primacy and influence in the Indo-Pacific region. After exiting the EU, Britain is on the search for a “globalist” role in world affairs, and AUKUS may have provided Britain with an opportunity to make a ‘comeback’ in a region that it was once influential. By piggy-riding on the US tenacity to dominate the regional security agenda, Britain would be able to reassure the US of their special relationship and as a reliable ally. AUKUS

provides for Britain a means of strengthening its position and embracement in the region. Britain, like US and Australia is very concerned about the dispute in the South China Sea and wants an outcome that will favour them. Unlike Australia and the US, Britain is geographically a ‘far-away’ power, thus can avoid unnecessary entanglement in disputes in the region, including the South China Sea.

Whither France?

France is a Pacific power by virtue of its possessions and interests in the South Pacific. But France has been a quiet power in the region since its departure from its former colonies in Southeast Asia. France and the US are allies in NATO, although it has been left out of AUKUS. The end of the Cold War and the decline of ‘Gaullism’ in French foreign policy has led to a more reconciliatory relations towards the US, allowing France to penetrate into the guarded sphere of American dominated power groupings, and gaining the trust of Australia to cooperate in nuclear submarine project. French reaction to the formation of AUKUS, as a stab in the back is understandable, but entails questions as to the strategic impact on its position and interests in the Indo-Pacific. In a region overwhelmingly dominated by the US and its allies, it is preferable to avoid being trapped in the American -China rivalry.

Unlike Australia which has been unequivocal in its criticism of China, France has been more muted. This may have preserved its reputation and respect, and avoid the fate that might befall Australia as a trusted American ally. There is a perception that being left out of AUKUS has dented French prestige, as such, could France remain a quiet bystander? The EU plan for the Indo-Pacific engagement is one way for France to involve itself in regional peace and stability, albeit multilaterally. By staying out of the entanglement of US-China rivalry, France may have avoided pitfalls that accompany such involvement.

The South China Sea dispute.

At the centre stage of Southeast Asian regional stability is the South China Sea dispute involving China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. Any military confrontation between major powers in the region will spell disaster for peace and stability that the region has so far enjoyed. One may ask the relationship between the formation of AUKUS and the South China Sea dispute? AUKUS is perceived as “anti-China” and much of the animosity towards China revolves around its behaviour in the South China sea. Both the US and Australia are critical of China’s ‘assertive behaviour ‘in the South China Sea. The dispute has provided for the US a ‘window of opportunity’ to involve itself closely in the region, and in the process countering China in its own vicinity. China is not entirely blameless. Its intransigent attitude in the South China Sea does not endear it to its Southeast Asian neighbours, in fact raised fear and suspicion as to Chinese aims in the area, contributing to the unpredictability in regional peace and stability.



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Concluding remarks.

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a centre of gravity for major power rivalry and competition. The South China sea is both the front and the back yards for many countries in the region, making the South China Sea dispute an important issue to deal with. The formation of AUKUS is a form of response to China's assertiveness in the region. Southeast Asia, (the South China sea included) remains the most important region for China in many aspects and for various reasons. Unlike the US, Australia or the UK, China lacks possibility of forming an alliance of likeminded states in the region. Its acceptance in the region is coupled with the hope that China would behave reasonably and with responsibility, especially with regards to the South China Sea dispute. This will not only contribute to stability and peace in the region, but will also eliminate one major excuse for extra-regional powers to intervene forcefully to protect their interests.