FEATURE

Reshaping the Indo-Pacific Construct through Strategic Geopolitical Convergences

AUKUS as a Harbinger of a Multipolar Hegemony in the Region

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The evolution of China as a global power and its rise as a potential competitor in a world order dominated by the United States have triggered a struggle to establish hegemony. Today, existing and emerging superpowers are trying to establish their presence in the maritime arena to claim the title of global hegemon, and the geographical significance and commercial pertinence of the Indo-Pacific construct has turned the region into a theater of opportunities.

The chaotic withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, the conclusion of America's 20 years of war on terror and with the resulting return of the Taliban to power, led to the collapse of American presence in the region. It is perceived as a strategic failure by the international community and raised questions about the credibility of American power and influence; the principal feature of a hegemon or superpower is its ability to project power on a global scale. Most trade is conducted on the seas and oceans, and a strategically comprehensive maritime strategy is to establish international coalitions throughout the international community for safeguarding their interests and the free flow of trade.

China is projected to become the largest economy in the world by 2030, and its ground-breaking innovation, pioneering technologies, artificial intelligence, enhanced military and naval capabilities will certainly help place China in a dominant position.[1] At this juncture, with the unpredictability of the future of global events in light of the US-China strategic competition, the Joseph Biden administration understands that it cannot contain the rise of China single-handedly. Likewise, Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific region cannot be resolved by an individual superpower but through geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic convergences of multiple powerful nations by strengthening partnerships with allies and ensuring a perpetually influential hold in the region.

The formation of the alliance between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) has added another aspect to the dimension of the Indo-Pacific construct, and the announcement of this trilateral alliance by US president

Joe Biden, Prime Minister Boris Johnson of Great Britain, and Prime Minister Scott Morrison of Australia is a strategic partnership based on a collective vision of a free and inclusive Indo-Pacific.[2]

Lessons Drawn from the Past: From Regime Change to Converging Security Alliances

Since the early twentieth century, the United States has attempted to change regimes in various countries and replace them with functional democracies and has encountered successes and failures.[3] Whereas attempts succeeded in Germany, Japan, and Italy, its biggest failures were in Iraq and Afghanistan, because the former Axis powers had a functioning structure in terms of the political system, large industrial capacity and economic substructure, advanced technology, and an educated population. These pre-existing factors along with US Marshall Plan helped Germany, Japan, and Italy to become functional democracies, whereas in Afghanistan there were no politically and economically sound structures before 9/11; therefore, it was difficult for the United States to transform Afghanistan into a functional democratic state with a coherent and sustainable political structure with popular legitimacy.[4]

Over the years, collusive US involvement in the other regions through the game of regime change has now been replaced by the idea of establishing plurilateral or minilateral alliances by strategic geopolitical convergences created to form power structures and constructs to achieve collective and specific objectives by combining strengths to maintain a balance in the global order; this is a departure from the twentieth-century approach of military alliances to contain a rival superpower.[5] These alliances have shared interests, similar threat perceptions, and mutual areas of cooperation, which come together and work on a common strategic goal.[6] These alliances are not bound by geographical proximity but by global strategic needs and collective concerns such as climate change, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the COVID-19 global health crisis and its economic implications.[7] These threats can be resolved by different states coming together and establishing minilateral alliances to build a constructive association. The so-called Quad and AUKUS are examples of such alliances that are strategically constructed to counter China's rising dominance in the Indo-Pacific region.

A Pivotal Shift in Strategic Priorities: Binding the United States into the Indo-Pacific Security Architecture

"The political and commercial contestation over the geographical construct reveals the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific itself."[8] In terms of develop-

ment and economic diversity, the Indo-Pacific region is vastly heterogeneous, comprising 38 countries at different levels of progress and growth but interdependently tethered and connected by the Indian Ocean.[9] The region consists of more than 60 percent of world population, represents 44 percent of the world surface area, accounts for 60 percent of global GDP, and steers more than two-thirds of global growth.[10] In regard to military capacity and capabilities, out of the ten largest standing armies in the world, seven are in the Indo-Pacific, out of which five nations spend the maximum on their defense budget. Furthermore, the region is home to the second-largest (China) and third-largest (Japan) economies of the world, and one-third of global shipping is carried through the South China Sea, where Chinese aggression is dominant.[11]

For the United States, China is considered to be its biggest adversary as it challenges American global hegemony; over the years, China has grown its economy and developed its naval capabilities to the point that it surpassed the United States, becoming the largest navy in the world.[12] Therefore, to maintain the balance of power, the United States needs to curb China's aggression in the Indo-Pacific region and incapacitate its plan to expand its capabilities and interests beyond its maritime borders through an aggressive naval presence in the Indian and Pacific Oceans; it can be accomplished only when the United States engages in diplomatic and military alliances with other strategic partners to gain a substantial and long-standing hold in the Indo-Pacific region.[13]

The United States has shifted its priorities away from the Middle East, which consumed US attention and resources for two decades. It was the aftermath of 9/11 that dictated 20 years of American foreign policy, and the withdrawal was a strategic reprioritization considering the rise of China.[14] Now that the United States has completely withdrawn from Afghanistan, it has the capacity to upsurge its deployments to increase its naval presence in the Indo-Pacific, altering and reallocating its defense budget resources from the US Army and directing it toward developing new advanced capabilities that can further augment the capacity of the US Navy and US Air Force, two branches that are far more relevant and vital for countering Chinese aggression and balancing power in the region.[15] The formation of AUKUS as a strategic military alliance is a step in this direction and marks a pivotal shift in the strategic priorities of American commitments toward its allies in the region and helps bind the United States indelibly into the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

The AUKUS Alliance: Toward A Multipolar Hegemony

The US vision of a "free and open Indo-Pacific construct" is a perception of a region free from China's domination, and the formation of AUKUS should be

viewed as a sign of continuity of the US commitment toward this region with the support of the UK and Australia. The amalgamation of these three powerful nations into a military alliance can strengthen their capabilities and enhance their strategic prowess in the Indo-Pacific, consequently bringing them closer to their strategic pursuits and turning their shared vision into reality.

This alliance has been carefully designed to anchor Britain and Australia and align them with American strategic pursuits to strengthen mutual capabilities in the region. For the US administration, the formation of AUKUS means redefining and re-establishing American influence and demonstrating a departure away from Donald Trump's "America Alone"[16] approach and toward Biden's "rescuing US foreign policy"[17] approach, underscoring the power shift[18] of American priorities in Asia. Similarly, for Johnson, this alliance fits his foreign policy vision of a "Global Britain"[19] as it makes a comeback in the region as a major security partner almost six decades after its withdrawal from "east of Suez."[20] The association with this alliance will provide a good balance for a post-Brexit Britain to pursue its national interests and anchor itself in the Indo-Pacific construct. [21]

For Scott Morrison, this partnership is a watershed moment in Australia's adjustment to an Indo-Pacific region being altered by the increasing Chinese economic and diplomatic footprint.[22] It will not only pave a way to acquire nuclear submarines but also make Australia among the only six world powers that can challenge China.[23] It will significantly enhance its force projection capabilities, develop its cyber and aerospace capabilities, and strengthen its deterrence against any major threat.[24]

The augmentation of China's power in the Indo-Pacific revolves around three maritime zones: the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, and the South China Sea. Its geostrategic approach is grounded in a bellicose desire to expand economic, strategic, and security horizons through heavy investments in port developments and militarization of bases.[25] In its global venture to expand its influence, China is converging with other regional players to increase regional connectivity through infrastructure and economic development projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and the Belt and Road Initiative to build a vast network of trade routes across the globe.[26] Thus, the formation of the AUKUS alliance has risen amid the struggles of containing and fighting the pandemic, escalating Chinese bellicosity with neighbors such as India, the Philippines, and Vietnam, its crackdowns in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet, and its international trade and economic policies and the impact of Chinese economic coercion faced by Australia.[27] In recent years, China has also intensely extended its undersea fleet and expanded its exploration of its close waters including Taiwan, Indonesia, and Australia. This growing appetite for power and

influence, when combined with the unyielding intentions of creating a hyper-aggressive presence through its "wolf warrior"[28] diplomacy across the globe, has triggered threat perceptions and provoked security concerns for the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. Aggression and conflicts are China's techniques to deal with criticism and disapproval.[29] From China's viewpoint, this diplomacy tactic is a reaction to the discriminatory and unfair line of attack toward China by other nations, especially the United States, but in reality, wolf warrior diplomacy is detrimental to China's foreign policy, as it has caused a disparaging response, enfeebling China's soft power and denting its global image.[30]

AUKUS is meant to deepen cooperation on defense technologies and involves sharing information and technology in numerous capacities, including intelligence and quantum technology, along with the acquisition of cruise missiles.[31] Nuclear submarines are central to the agreement; they are to be built in Australia with US and UK consulting and accessing technology for production.[32] At the moment, the Royal Australian Navy operates six *Collins*-class submarines, powered by diesel engines and batteries that were commissioned between 1996 and 2003.[33] These submarines, functioning on batteries, are quieter compared to nuclear-fueled submarines, but nuclear propulsion enables the submarines to stay submerged for longer and navigate faster and farther, which are crucial attributes for maintaining a strong presence between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, along with the first island chain that comprises Taiwan, the Philippines, and Japan.[34] What makes this trilateral pact special is the promise to supply nuclear-powered submarines to Australia; the United States has shared this submarine technology only with the United Kingdom, starting in 1958, but with the establishment of this alliance both the United States and Great Britain are prepared to take a big leap by exporting nuclear technology to a nonnuclear-powered nation.[35]

Historically the three nations have been fervent supporters of democracy and fought as allies for more than a century, and with the disquieting power asymmetry and China's ascendency in the Indo-Pacific region, there was a need for a converging multipolar presence of powerful nations to respond constructively to China's growing naval capability. For the Biden administration, AUKUS is not just about submarines; it goes beyond that, building an amalgam of naval power through a robust alliance to form a new global order where the United States is strategically converging with two other powerful nations to establish a multipolar hegemony to counter emerging threats from China in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Significance of AUKUS for the United States: Reviving the Declining Faith in the American Global Power

The foreign policy repercussions of Trump's presidency and the Afghanistan debacle are perceived among the international community as a decline of American leadership and hegemony; for the Biden administration, the formation of AUKUS is an endeavor to revive declining faith in American global power and influence in a world order witnessing shifts in international alliances and the evolving use of the pervasive power of technology.[36] In 2001, the purpose of the invasion of Afghanistan was to defeat the Taliban and avenge the 9/11 terrorist attacks on American soil; this determination was supported by NATO allies and the European Union (EU), partaking in the war on terror and displaying dedication toward NATO, but after twenty years, spending billions of dollars, and losing many American and European soldiers, the United States left Afghanistan to the Taliban.[37]

However, President Biden's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan was a strategic reprioritization; the recent aim of US foreign policy has gradually shifted from defending the homeland from the threat of terrorism to curtailing the aggressive rise of China. The wars fought in Iraq and Afghanistan drained resources; now, after the withdrawal, the United States under President Biden is better positioned to focus on China.

The United States and its European allies have been committed to the idea of democracy and its ennoblement since the end of World War II and have enjoyed a mutually beneficial partnership. It is assumed that Europe's loss of faith in American leadership is a reflex to Biden's stand on the withdrawal, but on a closer reflection, one finds that Europe and the NATO allies had started to lose faith in American leadership before the Afghanistan withdrawal; the European perception of United States started to change during the Trump presidency when he remarked that NATO was redundant and he derided the functioning of EU. [38] His policy of "America First," his positions toward the EU and NATO, and unilateral withdrawal from multilateral pacts and treaties pertaining to trade and environment, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and Paris Climate Agreement, severed many ties. Public and leadership opinions regarding European perceptions of the United States have changed considerably.[39] A pan-European survey across 11 countries, commissioned by the European Council on Foreign Relations, stated that most Europeans believe that in a decade China will be more powerful than the United States. In Spain, 79 percent of citizens, and 72 percent of citizens in Italy and Portugal, believe that China will override the United States in terms of power and influence. Public opinions in Denmark and Hungary were

found to be more positive about the future of American power, but 48 percent of the public were confident that in the next ten years China will overpower the United States. [40]

Joe Biden's presidency was seen as a much-needed change in leadership, as he wanted to re-engage with Europe and repair the battered transatlantic relationship, but the complete re-positioning of American priorities from Europe to the Indo-Pacific region under his presidency, in addition to the formation of AUKUS, have again shaken European faith in the American leadership.

In September 2021, the EU put out its first Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, delineating its intended involvement in the region and stating that the "futures of the EU and the Indo-Pacific are inextricably linked given the interdependence of economies and the common global challenges."[41] The EU is the biggest investor and major trading partner for the economies of the Indo-Pacific region, and Europe has vested interests in the region; its strategy needs to engage more to "strengthen its strategic reach and its supply chains," as any predicaments or setbacks in the Taiwan Strait and the South China sea may have a "direct impact on European Security and prosperity."[42] With China shifting the global balance of power, for a powerful transatlantic alliance to exist in the coming decades, an EU-US strategic dialogue is crucial for transatlantic cooperation. In the future, with the growing economic competition, impacts from climate change, possible pandemics, and threats of cyber warfare, the United States and Europe cannot single-handedly undertake these challenges, and therefore both the United States and EU are essential for each other. New partnerships and alliances cannot untie the EU-US relationship, as the EU needs the United States in NATO and US security guarantees against Russia; the United States in the coming years needs the EU to contain China and to maintain a strong and protracted presence in the region.[43]

In the future, both the UK and France will be strong pillars in the European security structure. Through its naval presence and the overseas territories, France is a major Indo-Pacific power; 93 percent of its exclusive economic zones are in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and the region is home to 1.5 million French citizens, in addition to the 8,000 soldiers stationed in the region. [44] In the past, the US and French militaries have operated together in the Persian Gulf, Syria, and Sahel and have been engaged in the Indo-Pacific region for more than a decade. French anger over the AUKUS deal is mainly with Australia and the United States, but Britain did not suffer diplomatic fallout since the announcement of the agreement; France called back its ambassadors from both Australia and the United States while its ambassador in Britain remained placed.[45] AUKUS is significant for the United States, as it will not only bind the United States indelibly

into the Indo-Pacific security architecture but also bind the United States within the European security structure through Britain.[46]

Moreover, to have Australia as a member of Quad and Five Eyes as a close partner in the Indo-Pacific is without a doubt an advantage for the Biden administration, and having eight nuclear-powered submarines as an additional fleet to the US Navy in the South China Sea will be instrumental in light of increasing strategic competition in the region. Both the United States and Australia are part of US-Australia defense alliances and initiatives such as the US-Australia Force Posture Initiative and the Enhanced Air Cooperation program,[47] and the AUKUS will complement these alliances. Another advantage is setting up a local industrial base in Australia to build and maintain the nuclear-powered submarines for the United States; it will augment sustainment and enable the processes of maintenance and resupply of the nuclear-powered submarines. This advantage will also take pressure off US industrial capacity for submarine construction, which has been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 because of substantial loss of funding.[48] And it is projected that in the coming 20 years the number of submarines available to the US Navy will shrink considerably[49] as US submarine maintenance requirements will surpass its shipyard capacity in as assessed by a congressional budget report[50] published in March 2021.

Even though Quad was already a part of the Indo-Pacific security structure and a significant minilateral alliance for the United States, there was a need for an alliance like AUKUS because Quad was always an informal alliance of countries that came together to focus on redefining the contours of soft power by safeguarding maritime security through upholding the freedom of navigation and ensuring territorial connectivity.[51] The Biden administration wanted an alliance that could project American power and influence across the region, and AUKUS explicitly does that, as it is meant to deal with security threats and perceptions by focusing on strengthening military capabilities and competencies of three like-minded allies in the Indo-Pacific region. The rationale behind this trilateral pact was to set a precedent for an alliance to project the power potential the United States still holds in the world, especially against China, and to restore lost faith in American leadership after Trump's denunciation of global compacts and the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Conclusion

AUKUS is a powerful economic and strategic partnership of military engagement among three democratic powers to accomplish collective and mutual objectives based on international rules and norms. The need for such alliances validates the power struggle in the region, and the progression of geopolitical strategic al-

liances like AUKUS are vital for maintaining the balance of power in the region. But there are some inadequacies and gaps that need to be addressed.

First, the stratagem to augment Australia's defense capabilities is being purposefully brought in place by the Biden administration to amend the impact of a rapidly diminishing power gap between the United States and China, but the agreement is still new and yet to be discussed in detail; there is ambiguity in terms of costs and the time frame. Progress is bound to take longer, as Australia lacks a nuclear infrastructure; as pointed by President Biden, a time frame of 18 months has been marked as a consultation period, where contingents of these three nations will deliberate and decide on the inner workings to warrant compliance with nonproliferation commitments. Also, given the threat of aggressive Chinese expansionism, for both the United States and Australia, effective patrolling in Pacific waters is an immediate necessity; the six *Collins*-class submarines that Australia owns are slated to be relieved after five years.

Second, this trilateral partnership is distinctive and more significant compared to past engagements; it explicitly centers on cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and is said to complement efforts of other organizations and regional alliances such as Five Eyes and the Quad to improve cooperation and synergism in diplomacy, intelligence-sharing, defense, and health security and global governance. Both Quad and AUKUS alliances are integral to the Indo-Pacific approach, but in terms of the framework, both are different. The Quad is a strategic diplomacy pact, whereas AUKUS is a strategic military pact. Also, there has been no clarity on how the frameworks of these alliances will be integrated, because the other member countries of Five Eyes (New Zealand and Canada) and Quad (Japan and India) are not part of AUKUS. After all, Japan's opposition to nuclear technology and India's strong belief in strategic autonomy with its disinclination toward military security alliances makes them unlikely to become part of AUKUS. Similarly, for many years New Zealand and Canada, the two other members of Five Eyes, have maintained a silent posture in terms of their foreign policy strategies and therefore are inefficacious in the re-emergence of Five Eyes.

Third, for United States, the approach of forming minilateral alliances in the Indo-Pacific is a way to build new and strategic partnerships with like-minded partners and converge on shared interests and concerns to enhance cooperation and alter the security landscape of the region. But with increasing regional instability and the arms race in the region, the world is again heading toward another Cold War like situation. It has been observed that, to counter China, the Indo-Pacific edifice requires multilateral cooperation similar to NATO's framework, which the AUKUS framework lacks.

Fourth, the future of the Indo-Pacific is intricately tethered to countries that are geographically distant even as the region has become a hub of global geostrategy either to contain the meteoric rise of China to maintain the balance of power or to reclaim their own space in the maritime arena. The increased involvement and participation of big powers in the region underlines the importance it holds at a global level, but these involvements will intensify risk within the internal regional dynamics.

As the rivalry between the United States and China intensifies with the changing political and security dynamics in the region, a shift in international politics and geostrategic priorities is inevitable. Since the end of World War II, the United States has projected power across this region, and the formation of AUKUS is an attempt to complete its next move in the power game by rebalancing the US strategic locus in the region with the intention of a long-term commitment in the Indo-Pacific construct to maintain and slow down the shift in the maritime balance of power by strengthening the military ties with Australia and United Kingdom. ✪

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