

AUKUS: Redrawing the Geopolitical Map

Dennis Hardy

The use of the world's oceans as 'theatres of war' is nothing new. Time and again, foreign navies have embarked from their home ports, either to engage their enemies at sea or to force a landing and subsequent invasion. For several centuries, for instance, the Indian Ocean witnessed the arrival of ships of European powers, rounding the southern tip of Africa on their way to a succession of colonial conquests. Later, during the 1940s, Japanese forces used the sea, as well as land and air, when they invaded the countries of South-East Asia. Following the Second World War, however, it has been commerce rather than conflict which has accounted for most of the maritime activity in the region, with some of the world's busiest shipping routes criss-crossing the world's third-largest ocean. There was even a point in the twentieth century when a number of littoral states thought that war could permanently be excluded, envisioning the Indian Ocean as a potential 'zone of peace'.¹ This was not to be and, more recently, it has become an arena for the emergence of new rivalries. The recent launch of a security pact, known as AUKUS, is the latest, and will possibly prove to be the most significant, response to an evolving situation.²

This paper is designed to explain what AUKUS is and to locate it in a geopolitical context, pointing to some of the implications for nations in the region and beyond. It has been the case for some years now that one can no longer look at the Indian Ocean in isolation; there is no option but to see it as part of the wider Indo-Pacific and to acknowledge that the main geopolitical players are changing.³ America still assumes the role of world leader but now China is widely seen as its main rival. Nor is change restricted to the main players: from the perspective of medium powers and small island states as well, one has to ask what the redrawing of strategic boundaries will mean. Is there a role for smaller players, other than as onlookers, while the major powers achieve their own interests? What are the changes we might expect from this shifting focus eastwards? Will AUKUS bring greater security to the region or will it simply raise the stakes and accelerate the onset of a new Cold War? Is it an exaggeration to claim that 'AUKUS could be the most important restructuring of regional security architecture in half a century?'⁴

At the confluence of two seas

*We are now at a point at which the Confluence of the Two Seas is coming into being.*⁵

AUKUS is the ‘Tolkienesque’ name of the new defence pact brokered between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. It is itself an acronym derived (more or less) from the initials of the three member states. If it has a chilling ring about it – a name Tolkien might have used to warn of a grim denizen of the deep, hidden from human eyes, never knowing the light of day nor the warmth of the sun – that might simply be because of what it stands for. At the heart of the pact are plans for a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines, designed to patrol the inky-black waters of connected seas and with the capacity to unleash their weapons. Of course, the instigators present it in a different way, as a harbinger of good, a means of balancing power in the region and thereby preventing war:

*The endeavour we launch today will help sustain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.*⁶

At this early stage in its history, the contribution of the pact to peace and stability can only be conjectural. On the laudable aim of preventing war in the region, the jury will be out for some time to come. Whether AUKUS ushers in or forecloses the advent of a new Cold War is yet to be determined.

Negotiated with the utmost secrecy, AUKUS was announced to an unsuspecting world on 15 September 2021.⁷ The three member states issued a joint communiqué to explain that its purpose is to provide a wide range of collaboration, from cyber-security to artificial intelligence. But the headline which captured widespread attention was for American and British ‘know-how’ to be used to build for the Australian navy at least eight nuclear-powered submarines. Twelve diesel-powered submarines had already been commissioned from French contractors but that arrangement (drawn up in 2016) was now scrapped in favour of the nuclear option. Diesel has the advantage that, when used in electric mode, any noise can be reduced to an absolute minimum; on the other hand, although its capacity has been steadily enhanced, there are still limits to how long diesel-powered craft can remain on patrol. In contrast, a nuclear-powered fleet – using state-of-the-art technology – can also be used with stealth but can remain ‘on station’ more or less indefinitely. Its geographical reach is, therefore, infinitely larger and its location less predictable.

It all amounts to a multi-billion-dollar project that will probably take at least a decade (almost certainly longer) before it can be fully operational.⁸ Undoubtedly, if completed, it will have a major impact in the region but can one speak of redrawing the geopolitical map? There are certainly reasons to suggest it might lead to this kind of change. An obvious one is that it affirms the existing reality of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic arena. The modern idea of ‘a confluence of two seas’ is often attributed to a speech given in 2007 by the then Japanese prime minister, Shinzo Abe, to the Indian Parliament, in which he spoke of an ‘Arc of Freedom and Prosperity along the outer rim of the Eurasian continent’ and a ‘broader Asia’ that would evolve into:

... an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the United States of America and Australia. Open and transparent, this network will allow people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely.⁹

Since then, the concept of the Indo-Pacific has been defined and redefined, not simply as a semantic exercise but, more significantly, with different ends in mind. In 2013, Australia, for which the Indian and Pacific Oceans have always been a geographical reality, made a point of relocating its remit from 'Asia Pacific' to 'Indo-Pacific':

Whilst the term Asia Pacific has underpinned the strategic and economic lexicon for some time, the term Indo-Pacific has emerged from a geographical footnote to become a geopolitical reference point.¹⁰

Other nations, too, would endorse the view that the concept is no longer a geographical footnote, not least of all India with its 'Look East' policy which shifts attention to the ASEAN countries and, beyond these, the South China Sea. Not surprisingly, though, it is the United States which is in the fore of extending the concept, articulated most forcefully during the Trump Administration. The then Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, in 2019, described it as a 'top priority' for his nation, and referred to Trump's vision of 'a free and open Indo-Pacific in which all countries prosper side by side as sovereign, independent states'.¹¹

Most notable is that, when AUKUS was announced, there were few, if any, direct references to China. Yet no-one could doubt that the idea of responding to the aspirations of the East Asian giant has for some years been at the heart of a unified view of the two oceans. China is the panda in the room, its presence diplomatically not mentioned but in everyone's minds. At the heart of AUKUS is the inescapable fact that America and its allies have growing concerns about China's expansionist policies. On land and across the sea, there is the cross-continental trade and global infrastructure strategy under the banner of 'One Belt, One Road'. Instigated at the start of President Xi Jinping's leadership, it has the potential to draw distant as well as nearby nations into a single infrastructure web, centred on the PRC.¹² Meanwhile, at sea, the world stood by while China appropriated a string of barely-formed islands in the South China Sea to extend its military control in that part of the region. No less brazen, China has removed the power of an effective opposition in Hong Kong, a previous city state for long used by the West as a commercial gateway to the Chinese interior. And, as an enduring feature of its foreign policy, the communist state keeps its sights on Taiwan as a target for future acquisition. Nor is the western Pacific its only realm of interest, for, at the same time, China's navy has threaded its way through the Malacca Strait and into the Indian Ocean. The logistical challenge of supporting its vessels so far from their home ports was eased through the establishment of a large military base in Djibouti, and through improved port facilities in compliant countries like Pakistan.

AUKUS is not the only response by the West to China's activities, the magnitude of which can no longer be challenged by rhetoric alone.¹³ In the words of a defence expert in Australia:

*This is part of a geopolitical shift which is driven by one big thing. And that is the direction that Xi Jinping is taking. This announcement fits with the growing participation of the world's biggest democracies to deter China from using its power.*¹⁴

In the present century, countries within the region and others from outside, have formed a series of alliances and loose networks with the shared aim of strengthening their own standing. Although the intelligence-sharing association, known colloquially as Five Eyes, dates from the end of the Second World War and was not originally aimed specifically to monitor developments in China, the US is keen to end the Anglosphere monopoly by including a number of key Asian countries.¹⁵ Additionally, with its more recent origins, the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), comprising the United States, India, Japan and Australia, is designed not only to facilitate a strategic dialogue between its members states but also to organize joint naval exercises. Nor are these the only networks with, for instance, ASEAN serving the interests of its own members. In addition, more localized agreements, like that between India and France, or Japan and India, seek to fill some obvious security gaps. In the words of one observer:

*There has been a boom in the number of minilateral partnerships in the Indo-Pacific in recent years, all arguably complementing each other with a shared sense of purpose... to balance China.*¹⁶

In the context of past deals, however, AUKUS is a game changer. Implementation is still years away but any pretence that the Indo-Pacific is simply about a 'free and open' region has overnight been swept away. The situation is now altogether more confrontational, the balancing of China's power the common aim.

Of course, in one sense, it might be argued this latest move merely intensifies the focus on China that resulted from the former French deal with Australia. But intensification is not to be ignored and there is no doubt that the introduction of a nuclear element is already a game changer. Not only will nuclear power for the submarine fleet add to the effectiveness of the force but there will always be the lurking suspicion that nuclear weaponry could follow. For Australia, it would be a big step, politically as well as technically, to upgrade the submarines in this way but by no means impossible in the long term.¹⁷ Little wonder, then that the news has evoked a commensurate response from China.

At this stage, the pact is no more than a paper exercise and much could happen before the first of the planned submarines is operational. Eighteen months is allowed for planning, and then construction may be further delayed because of the production challenge of introducing

a nuclear component. But the intention of deterring China from any further expansionist measures in the region are clear enough. Not surprisingly, the early response from Beijing to the new arrangement has been along the lines that not only will it not succeed but it ‘seriously undermines regional peace and intensifies the arms race’. Washington is accused of ‘hysterically polarizing its alliance system’ and Australia is dismissed as a mere ‘running dog of the US’.¹⁸ In the telling words of ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’, China has for some time been responding in an attacking mode to Western strategies in the region, arguing that its own outspokenness is perfectly defensible:

*In the eyes of the Westerners, our diplomacy is on the offensive and aggressive, but the truth is, it is them who are on the offensive and aggressive... What we are doing is merely justified defence to protect our rights and interests.*¹⁹

An exchange of words is one thing but the danger is that, given the long timescale before the planned submarines become operational, China may see opportunities to make headway with its own plans, without fear of immediate reprisals. America has not exactly covered itself with glory in Afghanistan (an irony in itself as part of the rationale of removing its troops was to concentrate on the threat of China) and this is not the best time to reveal any further signs of weakness. With tensions rising, it could prove to be a dangerous decade for all parties.

Orchestrating AUKUS

*The new alliance is all about mutual interest. The Aussies wanted lasting protection from China, which France could not provide, so Britain stepped in, with America, ready to share nuclear-powered submarine technology.*²⁰

The three main players – Australia, America, and the United Kingdom – are united in the goal of seeking to contain China and, thereby, encouraging greater stability in the region. They have put their trust in a fleet of technologically-advanced submarines to support this strategy. There is a logic in the choice of these three member states but, equally, the choice – and the respective motives of the three – is not without question.

Australia

Australia is at the heart of the project. This is where the new submarines will be built, and then operated by the Australian Navy. It had already staked the ground when it signed a contract with France but, when there were doubts whether its chosen partner could actually deliver, it was quick to realign with new partners.

In purely geographical terms, Indonesia, which borders not only the Indian and Pacific Oceans but also the South China Sea, might have been a better location for AUKUS. Australia, though, is a longstanding member of the Western alliance and a trusted friend of the US and UK, whereas Indonesia is an Islamic nation and enjoys closer cultural ties with China than America might have wished. For various reasons, Australia was the obvious choice to play a central role in the new project and, in a new mental map of the region, it might, through its actions, seem as if it is further north than its actual location.

In any case, even allowing for the fact that the project will be driven by America, Australia has its own reasons for being centrally involved. In recent decades, relations with China were close and both parties regarded this as beneficial. For Australia, there was a constant flow of Chinese students entering Australia's universities, contributing to the place of higher education as a pillar of the economy; China was investing heavily in agriculture, not least of all through large land purchases, and was buying minerals that it could not provide itself; and consumers have enjoyed the availability of low-price Chinese products while, in turn, there was a seemingly limitless market for Australian exports. It was surely a win-win situation. But it soon became apparent that for Australia there was a price to pay, a high price that even raised issues of sovereignty. Was China, in fact, viewing its southern hemisphere neighbour as little more than a vast reservoir of land, food supplies and mineral resources for its own burgeoning demands? What if trade deals gave way at some time in the future to more aggressive strategies? Would Australia be able to deter unwanted approaches and even to defend its shores? Was the resource-rich continent too enticing for its own good?

Some years before the announcement of AUKUS, there were signs that relations between the two countries were souring. In response to Australia's resistance to what it saw as undue interference in its internal affairs, China introduced a number of sanctions; a row over the source of the pandemic aggravated the situation; and a general shift in Australian public opinion against China, were all evidence that things were not as they had been. In this already fractious situation, it was no surprise that AUKUS poured salt on the wound, evoking an immediate response from Chinese diplomats, along the lines that the new pact represents a threat to regional peace, stability and the international order. Far from being a defensive mechanism, it clearly gave rise to a view that the West was preparing for more aggressive measures. As such, the member states of the pact were warned that 'attempts to contain or besiege China have never succeeded in the past and will always be an empty dream in the future'.²¹

Of course, in one sense, the die had already been cast. When Australia commissioned the fleet of diesel-powered submarines from France in 2016, its intentions were already clear. But introducing a more advanced technology, and with the close collaboration of the US and UK, there is now a sharper focus on potential military activity in the region. Apart from a rhetorical

response, China, meanwhile, can afford to wait and watch. Patience is a virtue of the oriental nation and, at this stage, it can by no means be certain that the aims of the pact will be fully or even partially fulfilled.

One potential stumbling block is that, although the submarines will not be designed to carry nuclear weapons, the very fact that they will rely on nuclear energy is enough to take the nation into new political territory. To date, the country has been a party to nuclear non-proliferation agreements but, while the submarines will not in themselves breach the terms of these, the project will, nevertheless, mark a potentially contentious change of direction:

Whether Australia leases, buys or builds nuclear-fuelled submarines, it will be the first non-nuclear state to do so... There is no doubt that nuclear-fuelled submarines are the most lethal and revolutionary advances in underwater weaponry. The increase in performance, deployment and speed without the need to refuel cannot be overstated, but this does come with risk to Australia's established nuclear policy and status.²²

So long as Australia's politicians bear in mind the potential risk of breaching the terms of their nation's 'established nuclear policy and status', it is likely that popular support for AUKUS can be maintained during the lengthy planning and construction period. The announcement has come at a time when public opinion is wary of China's intentions and would like to see Australia strengthen its own defences. More immediately, the multi-billion-dollar programme promises early benefits for communities in different parts of the country. Adelaide in South Australia, where much of the work will be centred, stands to gain from a huge injection of investment and jobs, while Perth will strengthen its own position as the national hub for submarine operations. In turn, as well as a modest increase in dockside and naval jobs, Darwin, in the remote Northern Territory – the target for Japanese air strikes during the Second World War – will be in favour of anything that will reduce its natural vulnerability.

United States

For America, the threat of China to its own hegemony is at the top of the foreign policy agenda. It is never too late to negotiate but it is hard to deny that at present the two nations are on a collision course and AUKUS is indicative of the evolving power struggle in the region. In spite of declaring that it is a deterrent rather than a tool of aggression, AUKUS will heighten tensions in the South China Sea. China's immediate response was that it 'seriously undermined regional peace and stability, intensified an arms race and undermined international non-proliferation efforts'.²³

The map is changing and, through the new pact, Australia will continue its present policy of encouraging the US to increase its presence in Australian territory. This will add to America's existing strongholds in the Indian Ocean – with major military bases at Djibouti in the west, and Diego Garcia in mid-ocean – and its control since the Second World War of the Pacific.

There is now the opportunity for a third military concentration, most likely concentrated in the north, with Darwin – closest to the South China Sea – the obvious location.

Indeed, just days after the announcement of AUKUS, it was revealed that the submarines were only part of a more comprehensive plan for an extended American military presence in Australia. The plan includes a greater number of troops on the ground, based initially in Darwin, and significantly enhanced cooperation on the development of missiles and explosive ordnance.²⁴ In the same statement, indicating a markedly more aggressive foreign policy for Australia, the Defence Minister also pointed to Indonesia, Vietnam and South Korea as countries where stronger ties could be formed:

*They understand the values that we adhere to and that we've consistently adhered to for a long period of time.*²⁵

Buoyed up by these announcements and closer alignment with the US, the Australian prime minister, Scott Morrison, then set off for Washington for his first meeting in person with President Biden, along with the leaders of the other two members of the Quad, India and Japan. In a joint statement after the event, they reaffirmed what they stand for:

*Together, we recommit to promoting the free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law and undaunted by coercion, to bolster security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.*²⁶

Care was taken, once again, to avoid direct reference to China, but that did not stop a response from the aggrieved nation. Quad, it was asserted, was no more than a Cold War construct and would intensify a regional arms race. And, just for good measure, it was dismissed as an outmoded forum:

*A closed, exclusive clique targeting other countries runs counter to the trend of the times and the aspirations of regional countries. It will find no support and is doomed to fail.*²⁷

Although the actual announcement of AUKUS might have taken the world by surprise, in many ways something along these lines was predictable. The Western powers were hardly going to sit on the sidelines indefinitely. What was surprising, though, was the manner of its announcement, apparently failing to inform the French – who overnight discovered that the multi-billion-dollar contract to build diesel-powered submarines had been shredded. It was a major blow in economic terms as well as prestige, and the reasons for doing things this way are still unclear. After all, France is not only part of the Western alliance but – with its overseas territories and longstanding naval presence – it has a major stake in the region. Why would the member states of AUKUS choose to alienate such an important nation?

United Kingdom

In some ways, the most surprising element in the new arrangement is the entry to the region of the UK. The day of worldwide imperialism is long over and it is now more than half a century since a decision was taken by the British government to withdraw its military presence 'east of Suez'.²⁸ The present development of AUKUS is, by any interpretation, a 'u-turn' for Britain, triggered by the nation's exit from the European Union and its new aspiration to be global in outlook.

Heralding the change, a government report in early 2021 explained the principles of a new global role and indicated where Britain should have a stronger presence. Notably, the Indo-Pacific now features as a part of the world which will be high on the foreign policy agenda:

*We will pursue deeper engagement in the Indo-Pacific in support of shared prosperity and regional stability, with stronger diplomatic and trading ties. This approach recognizes the importance of powers in the region such as China, India and Japan, and extends to others including South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines.*²⁹

Hardly had the printer's ink dried on the report before a UK aircraft carrier strike group was dispatched *en route* to the South China Sea. This, in turn, was followed up by an announcement that two patrol vessels would be stationed for at least the next five years in the region, with a specific brief to monitor the freedom of navigation in the waters around Taiwan. For 80% of this time, they will remain at sea. It was asserted that if the idea of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' is to mean what is intended, then the most vulnerable areas have to be defended.³⁰

None of this alone explains why the UK is one of the three AUKUS member states. At first glance, one might think this is just another example of Britain clinging to the coat-tail of its far more powerful ally. In fact, for a more credible reason one has to trace back to 1958, when an agreement was signed with the US for the joint advancement of nuclear weapons technology, a deal which the then British prime minister described as 'the Great Prize'.³¹ For a declining power like Britain, to remain on the frontline of nuclear weapons development has given it a status in global negotiations that it could not otherwise claim. Given Britain's close relations with Australia, and its European (if not EU) perspective, a case must have been made for its inclusion. It also means that, in the event of the US defaulting on its commitments, the UK could provide Australia with a realistic option in terms of technology 'know how'.

Britain's inclusion can also be seen as a sleight on more powerful Asian nations. The creation of an Anglo-centric alliance seems in many ways a throwback to an earlier era. Surely, it might be said, it would make more sense for Britain to work with France to support NATO

in a strategy to deter Russia from its own threats to European neighbours, such as Ukraine and, potentially, Estonia. And, in turn, to leave the Indo-Pacific to American and Asian nations:

*Indo-Pacific security should be left to the navies of the US, India and Japan. They have the might and the motive to keep the peace in the South China Sea. Britain simply doesn't.*³²

Resetting the compass

*In order to navigate the world, we need a book of maps – a mental atlas.*³³

The very announcement of AUKUS was sufficient to call for a review of the geopolitical map of the region. A wide range of countries will be directly affected (in an earlier message, American Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, referred to a total of thirty-five with a shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific),³⁴ including the three member nations of the new pact, as well as medium powers and small island states on the fringes.

Geographers use the term 'mental maps' to describe the disparity between what is actually on the ground and the way we see it. In other words, although the physical reality of the earth's surface remains the same, when new circumstances arise our perceptions of this 'reality' may well change from what they were. Thus, AUKUS, in this sense, should encourage a fresh look at the geopolitical map of the region. China, for example, is exactly where it always was and yet, from the perspective of Beijing, it can be characterized as a nation under pressure from the south and west. What is seen as containment from the outside becomes a source of aggression from within. In turn, a country like Australia sees things rather differently, as a nation that China has in its sights, and perhaps even prepared at some stage to invade the southern continent.

From one country to another, the compass needs to be reset.

French pique

If the inclusion of Britain came as something of a surprise, the exclusion of another European nation, France, was even more so. Not only was France the beneficiary of the 2016 agreement with Australia to build the diesel-powered fleet of submarines, but, unlike Britain, in the post-colonial era it has retained an important presence in the region. This is partly because of its overseas territories in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The French navy is also active in both oceans and there are close security links with India and, until the recent diplomatic debacle, with Australia too. Moreover, it has for long been a leading nation in the Western

alliance, acting, in a way, as the voice of the European Union. In the event, however, not only was France excluded from AUKUS but it appears that it was not even forewarned.³⁵ Diplomats are, of course, allowed expressions of pique and France has, predictably, made the most of the recent snub. But, even while protestations are underway, it will be reformulating its position. The central message is that France, with its vested interests in the region, can hardly turn away from the Indo-Pacific. It will remain an influential power in this part of the world and will look carefully at its post-AUKUS options. In a considered article by two analysts, a choice of four (by no means mutually exclusive) courses of action is offered. One is for France to strengthen its links with India, which will itself not necessarily want to be constrained by binding relations with the US; a second is to make Japan the other dominant element in its strategic network; a third is to lobby for an extension of the Quad membership, to include at least France and Britain; and the fourth option is to look for further strategic partnerships that might include ASEAN countries and South Korea.³⁶ AUKUS may have deleted France from its own map but it remains an important player which may yet play a more influential role.

India's ocean?

India, the equal of China in terms of the size of its population, has mixed feelings about AUKUS. On the one hand, it acknowledges that the new submarine fleet will add to the defensive capacity of its allies, in the face of Chinese naval expansion in the region. Quite apart from its name, the Indian Ocean can still be regarded as India's natural hinterland and the entry of its rival Asian power has forced a reappraisal of its own strategies. On the other hand, there is a sense that Australia is being favoured with advanced American technology, to a point where, in time, it might conceivably have an edge over India as a maritime power.

As one of the four members of QUAD, India (and, to an extent, Japan) has resisted the development of the network into an overtly military organization, along the lines, say, of NATO.³⁷ A result of this is that, rather than forcing the argument, it seems that, through AUKUS, America has now chosen to set up a parallel body with an unambiguous rationale. QUAD remains with a wider brief and, in general, enables India to maintain a less confrontational relationship with China.

ASEAN and beyond

ASEAN countries are not united in their degrees of resistance to China and, by implication, their response to AUKUS. The organization as a whole has a non-intervention policy but that is not enough to obscure the differences of view that are evident.³⁸ At one extreme, Myanmar is heavily dependent on Chinese investment (which is attracted by opportunities to forge a direct link from south-west China to the Bay of Bengal, and from there into the Indian Ocean) and is, in any case, unlikely to fall into line with the priorities of the West. Another member of ASEAN, Indonesia, in spite of recurring fishing disputes in the South China Sea, is more

open to Chinese cooperation than some of its neighbours. Likewise, Malaysia is opposed to the new defence pact as it believes it can only increase tensions in the region and, in turn, the dangers of a nuclear confrontation. In contrast, the Philippines is too deeply involved in a continuing dispute about China's encroachment into its maritime territory to take anything but a supportive line for AUKUS. Singapore is also in favour, on the grounds that everything needs to be done to enable the free and open use of the sea by shipping from China as well as other countries. Vietnam has not declared its position but the fact that it is another nation that is locked into a maritime dispute with China may edge it towards supporting AUKUS.

Meanwhile, well beyond the limits of ASEAN, the two important powers in north-east Asia with an interest in AUKUS are Japan and South Korea. Japan has openly welcomed the new agreement, as has South Korea. The latter nation already has strong defence ties with the US (largely because of the threat of North Korea) and it works closely with Australia too, so its support of AUKUS is hardly a surprise. What is more significant is that South Korea is becoming an important military nation in its own right, with advanced technology that can offer it a degree of independence in shaping its strategies.³⁹

On the margins

A small island state is seldom in a position to hold the ring. At times, as in the case of Seychelles, when it was centrally involved in the war against piracy off the coast of Somalia, an opportunity arises to sit at the same table as more powerful nations. And, at other times, when a small island state has something of interest to a major power – a valuable resource, say, or a strategic location – it may be able to exercise some influence. But if, for instance, America wants to impose its will, there is little that can be done to rebut it. Thus, AUKUS was negotiated well beyond the reach of any small island state, although the pact is already having repercussions in islands in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

One type of small island state in the region is the unique case of French overseas territories and other Francophile territories. There are different levels of autonomy but the most important in the Indian Ocean are Réunion and Mayotte, which have the status of French *départements*. For now, though, it is one of France's Pacific territories, New Caledonia, which has highlighted the importance of these post-colonial possessions. In previous referendums, New Caledonia chose to stay under French control although the pro-independence movement argued that, if it were to cut these ties, it would benefit from Chinese investment (as another small island state in the Pacific, Vanuatu, has done). A further referendum, in December 2021, came at a critical moment for France, already bruised by the AUKUS deal. In spite of being in all respects a small island state, had the outcome been in favour of independence the repercussions would have been far-reaching.

In Geopolitics, there is always a danger that we over focus on the large players. Such a myopic vision is dangerous because in a multi-polar world, events in small countries can have ripple

*effects and affect larger players' strategic interests. In December this year, less than 200,000 people in a small Pacific Island will be casting a vote with ripples that may extend far beyond what observers expect.*⁴⁰

Quite apart from the valuable nickel reserves to be found in New Caledonia, it would be in the interests of China to secure control not only of this particular territory but also other islands that are all that remain of France's former empire in these parts. Establishing a network of bases for China's navy is an important incentive and New Caledonia could well have featured in its plans. In the event, the outcome was the same as in previous votes; in fact, the majority this time in favour of remaining with France was overwhelming, although weakened by the fact that the opposition boycotted the poll.⁴¹

Another type of small island state is what used to be the British possession of the Chagos Islands, now grandly termed the British Indian Ocean Territory. The archipelago has a chequered history in which the indigenous population was removed to make way for the American military base of Diego Garcia.⁴² Although the right to return has been successfully argued in the international courts, the US and Britain have refused to give way. AUKUS will simply reinforce the *status quo*. In the context of an Indo-Pacific strategy to counter the Chinese naval threat in the region, it is not conceivable that two of the three members of the new pact will agree to vacate the islands.

Finally, there are independent island nations in both oceans which have little or no direct say in strategic developments like AUKUS. To take the example of Seychelles, although it was aligned with the Soviet Bloc during the Cold War of the last century, it has throughout its post-colonial history sought to retain good relations with all countries. China and India, America and France, are all seen as friends of Seychelles. Only when the sovereignty of the small island state might be threatened is it prepared to draw a line in the sand. Thus, in spite of longstanding links with India, a proposal by the Asian power to establish a military base on one of the outlying islands of the archipelago was rejected.⁴³ An alternative location was subsequently negotiated in Mauritius, and Seychelles was able to resume good relations with India.

AUKUS, however, presents a different scenario. Even if it is not in the interests of Seychelles to witness an increase in nuclear-based activity in the region, there is, effectively, nothing it can do about it. Although Seychelles was one of 86 signatories earlier in 2021 to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and it has long been opposed to nuclear proliferation, it is the major powers with an interest in the region that will determine new strategic alignments. So long as the new submarines remain nuclear powered and not nuclear armed this will not become an issue but the small group of diplomats in Seychelles will want to keep a watchful eye for any change of direction.

Prequel and sequel

This paper might best be described as a prequel. It responds to a recent announcement and most of the sources date from the weeks immediately following. But it is intended as more than a transitory news item. If the impact of AUKUS proves to be as far-reaching as early reactions suggest, there will be not one sequel but many. An early indication can be seen in the perspectives offered by David Brewster, Nilanthi Samaranayake, Jivant Schöttli and Christian Bueger, which follow this introductory article.

The continuing development of AUKUS will need to be monitored, not least of all to see whether (unlike the previous French deal) it will be fully implemented. Other aspects to be watched are the changing positions of nations, both for and against the pact, and consequential alliances in which those nations currently excluded from the triumvirate might well broker their own agreements. Most of all, the spotlight will remain on China which, beyond the rhetoric that followed the arrival of AUKUS, will surely update its own strategies.

Above all, AUKUS cannot be ignored. Its very presence has already changed the geopolitical map of the region. America has undoubtedly strengthened its position, as has Australia as a geopolitical player. But where does this leave France, sorely aggrieved at losing its advantage, or any one of the Asian powers which can justifiably question the endurance of an Anglo-based hegemony? Actions provoke reactions. AUKUS has set in motion a series of likely changes. The only thing that is certain is that a process of adjustments has only just started. New patterns will emerge and the geopolitical map will need constant revision. Analysts will have their work cut out to keep pace with this in the years ahead.

Dennis Hardy is an Emeritus Professor associated with the James R. Mancham Peace and Diplomacy Research Institute at the University of Seychelles. He is Editor of the bi-annual Seychelles Research Journal.

Notes and references

¹ As a result of lobbying by Sri Lanka, a Declaration was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1971, in the form of a resolution through which the Indian Ocean (with airspace and ocean floor limits to be determined) was designated as a Zone of Peace for all time. The idea was discussed for a number of years but never gained sufficient support to be implemented.

- ² The upper-case version of the name is used in this article as this is how it was presented by the member states in their official communiqué. But, other than in official documents, it seems that the media have generally adopted a mix of upper and lower case – thus, ‘Aukus’.
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- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ The latest estimate is that the first submarines could be ready by the early 2030s, rather than the original estimate of 2040. <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/defence-and-foreign-affairs/australias-nuclear-submarines-ahead-of-schedule/video/0259c2d19592faf5fa09b4199821748f>
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