

AUKUS and India's Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy

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The surprise announcement on 15 September 2021, reporting the formation of AUKUS, came just days before Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was set to attend the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising India, Australia, Japan and the U.S. for its first in-person Heads of State meeting on September 24 in the U.S. With two QUAD members, the US and Australia forming the AUKUS trilateral along with the UK, questions were immediately raised in the Indian media about what this meant for the QUAD and its significance as a strategic alignment amongst four key Indo-Pacific actors. Furthermore, the dramatic fallout with France, caused by the upending of a French multi-million-dollar submarine contract, resulted in an unusual display of disunity and competition amongst otherwise 'like-minded' Indo-Pacific players.

Responding to the news about AUKUS, India's official response was to emphasize the distinctiveness between the AUKUS and the QUAD formations. Indian Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shingrila stated: 'There is no link between AUKUS and Quad. AUKUS is a security alliance, Quad is a different group of countries working on a different vision... of the Indo-Pacific as a free, open, transparent, inclusive region.' The Minister of External Affairs, Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar when faced with the same questions about the implications of AUKUS at the India Today Conclave in October 2021,¹ repeated the fact that these were two very different arrangements. He also drew attention to India's own trilateral arrangements, including with Indonesia and Australia, Australia and Japan, and even Australia and France. None of these he claimed, detracted from the importance of, and the level of collaboration within, the framework of the QUAD.

Observers have argued that the implications of AUKUS for India remain uncertain.² Some have proposed that AUKUS aggravates India's central dilemma:³ to balance openly or not

¹ India Today Conclave, Dr. S. Jaishankar.

<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/video/india-today-conclave-jaishankar-taliban-regime-pakistan-china-us-1862698-2021-10-08> [Accessed 8 January 2022].

² Abhijit Singh, 'India remains divided about AUKUS'. *The Interpreter*, The Lowy Institute.

<https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-remains-divided-about-aucus> [Accessed 8 January 2022].

³ Manjari Chatterjee Miller, 'The Quad, AUKUS, and India's Dilemmas'. *Asia Program*, Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/article/quad-aucus-and-indias-dilemmas> [Accessed 8 January 2022].

to balance openly against China. Given its military focus, critics have argued that AUKUS dilutes the strategic significance of the QUAD, confirming its ‘non-military, non-security’ nature and relegating the QUAD to ‘soft issues’ such as vaccine distribution, climate change, technology, and scientific expertise.

Others have noted there are advantages to be gained from AUKUS which can lead to a strengthening of conventional deterrence in the region.⁴ Beyond the narrow and long-term focus on nuclear submarine cooperation, the short-term agenda is to enhance competitiveness, especially vis-à-vis China, on a range of critical and strategic technologies. India’s own declared foreign policy goal of pursuing and enhancing strategic autonomy is buttressed by the announcement of AUKUS, which has also confirmed the need for ‘sober political and strategic judgement’.⁵ This includes further deepening an already strong relationship with France. As one of India’s major arms providers, France has an invaluable part to play in India’s bid to modernise its own defence industry and to build up self-reliance through its Make-in-India campaign. Furthermore, as a maritime and naval power in the Indo-Pacific, the strategic partnership with France, and through France, India’s security relationship with the European Union, are of great importance.

Given the very targeted and specific purpose of developing nuclear submarines for Australia, AUKUS can also be read as a declaration of confidence and solidarity amongst three Anglophone allies, already bound to each other through exclusive security organizations such as the intelligence alliance, the Five Eyes. This fact has not been lost on India, especially for those who have been sceptical of closer relations with the US and have questioned the wisdom of being an active proponent of the QUAD, given its anti-China sentiments. It is pointed out that AUKUS showcases the limits to the Indo-US partnership given that the US has refused to share the kind of submarine technology that it is willing to share with its two Anglo-Saxon partners, the UK and Australia.⁶ However, it can be argued that the creation of AUKUS, and especially the performative drama of its announcement, the apparent secrecy and immediate fallout with France – have also provided India’s diplomats and negotiators with room to manoeuvre.

⁴ C. Raja Mohan, ‘India Welcomes AUKUS Pact as China Deterrent’.
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/16/aucus-india-australia-uk-us-submarines/> [Accessed 8 January 2022].

⁵ Yamini Aiyer *et al.*, ‘India’s Path to Power: Strategy in a World Adrift’, *Centre for Policy Research*.
https://takshashila.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Indias_Path_to_Power_English.pdf
[Accessed 8 January 2022].

⁶ Op-ed by India’s former naval chief, Admiral Arun Prakash, ‘The new AUKUS alliance holds some lessons for India’, *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/aucus-alliance-new-partnerships-realpolitik-7523384/> [Accessed 8 January 2022].

In December 2021, India and Russia held their first ever 2+2 dialogue at the level of Foreign and Defence Ministers. This took place in New Delhi during Russian President Vladimir Putin's brief visit to India for the 21st Annual India-Russia Summit with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi – a significant visit given how little President Putin has travelled to attend recent summits in person. Over the last year, tensions and differences had been voiced over India joining the Indo-Pacific initiative and Quad, with statements and counter-statements made on either side, including comments by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar. The international fracas caused by AUKUS, may have provided the space needed for some sort of reconciliation to have taken place within the relationship. Both countries decided to strengthen bilateral economic cooperation and to boost the Vladivostok–Chennai energy corridor, a potential gateway for Russia into the Indo-Pacific and an alternate source of energy for India, away from the Middle East.

In terms of direct implications for India's security environment AUKUS certainly signals a willingness on the part of the US, Australia and the UK to invest over the long run in developing crucial capabilities that will be needed to cope with the inevitable challenge of China's growing naval power. This is of great importance to India's calculations for defence preparedness. However, AUKUS does lean towards a focus on China's capabilities in the South China Sea and ambitions in the Pacific. For India, it is the Indian Ocean and the pressures exerted by China on its land borders and through Pakistan that remain the most immediate and imminent strategic challenges. As a result, AUKUS has confirmed the need, and will thus compel India, to accelerate its pursuit of strategic autonomy through the diversification of its multilateral and bilateral security relationships and the strengthening of its global economic and political standing.

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