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Taylor, Monique

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Issue Brief
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AUKUS, Advanced Capabilities and Defense Integration in the Indo-Pacific

Monique Taylor



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Nearly two years on from the inception of AUKUS in September 2021, the contours of this strategic partnership have begun to take a more concrete shape. Specifically, the roadmap for Pillar I, which aims to equip Australia with conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines (SSN) and develop a new class of SSN, has been released, and there have been further discussions on Pillar II, advanced capabilities. While both pillars support the overarching objective of AUKUS, which is to integrate the defense industrial bases of Australia, the UK, and the U.S., Pillar II in particular reveals its deeper motivation in competing for global pre-eminence in emerging technology. This issue brief examines the aims and strategic rationale of AUKUS, focusing on its pursuit of collective deterrence vis-à-vis China. In doing so, it evaluates some of the opportunities and challenges AUKUS faces moving forward, paying attention to its attempt to develop and equip partners with leading-edge military technologies under a minilateral institutional arrangement.

Introduction

On September 15, 2021, the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) trilateral security pact was announced. The European Union (EU), which unveiled its Indo-Pacific strategy the following day, was caught by surprise. Although not unusual for a pact based on the development of defense capabilities, much was made of the secrecy around the AUKUS submarine deal, along with the debacle with France, whereby the Australian government cancelled its contact for French non-nuclear submarines.[1] These controversies overshadowed discussions of the primary objective of AUKUS, which is to integrate the defense industrial bases of these three maritime democracies by: (1) equipping Australia with conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines (SSN) and building a new class of SSN; and, (2) collaborating to advance technology development and sharing in cutting-edge defense capabilities in areas such as artificial intelligence (AI) and quantum computing.[2]

In accordance with the initial joint statement of AUKUS, the partners agreed to undertake a planning phase of 18 months to develop the roadmap concerning the submarine program.[3] This period

coincided with significant geopolitical events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the establishment of a Russia-China strategic partnership, and China's increased military assertiveness towards Taiwan, which brought the importance of military competition driven by technological superiority further to the fore in strategic thinking. On March 13, 2023 the pathway to support Australia's acquisition of SSNs was revealed by U.S. President Biden, Australian Prime Minister Albanese, and UK Prime Minister Sunak at the Point Loma naval base in San Diego, California.[4] Given the progress made by AUKUS both in outlining the specifics of the SSN program and advocating for a proactive approach to developing advanced defense technologies and achieving trilateral defense integration, a more detailed assessment of this new minilateral arrangement is now possible.

This issue brief examines the aims and strategic rationale of AUKUS, focusing on its pursuit of collective deterrence *vis-à-vis* China through defense integration and innovation power. Innovation power within this strategic partnership is to be achieved through jointly developing advanced military capabilities, which have the potential to provide an effective response to China's national strategy of military-civil fusion (MCF). The 'deteriorating regional security environment' and concomitant emergence of new strategic partnerships and alignments, widely referred to as 'minilaterals', is the starting point for this discussion on AUKUS' evolving strategies and the key challenges it faces.

Proliferation of Minilateralism

The Indo-Pacific's rapidly changing geopolitical landscape accounts for the emergence of AUKUS and informs its strategic purpose. AUKUS belongs to a category of international configurations called 'minilaterals'. Minilateralism is characterized by the formation of small-scale (3-6 states) coalitions of like-minded countries, often middle powers, that address narrowly defined issues and common objectives.[5] The proliferation and strengthening of

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minilateral arrangements, not only among the U.S. and its allies but also India and other non-aligned Asian powers such as Indonesia, is a distinctive feature of the Indo-Pacific security order, some other examples being the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) and the Australia-India-Indonesia (AII) trilateral.

The rise of Chinese aggression throughout maritime Asia over the past decade, where it has sought to establish its regional hegemony through a combination of military and economic coercion, has prompted the U.S. and many Indo-Pacific nations to reinvent their strategic discourses to better account for changing security dynamics and incorporate new partners to balance against China. Both the shift in geopolitical concept from 'Asia-Pacific' to 'Indo-Pacific' and the rise of minilaterals are key to understanding this new security landscape.[6] The failures of both multilateralism and the extant U.S. bilateral alliance system in managing security challenges in the Indo-Pacific has led to the emergence of these new strategic partnerships that differ in purpose, form, and function from conventional bilateralism and multilateralism.[7]

Much of what has already been written about the rise of minilaterals focuses on their distinctive institutional qualities such as the efficiency and flexibility of these loose and less formal partnerships

among countries that share a similar outlook in dealing with specific issues.[8] There are question marks over the effectiveness of minilateralism and its ability to navigate a complex security environment in the Indo-Pacific, as this region is also becoming an increasingly crowded and fragmented institutional space.[9] Given its ambitious military focus and the immense resources (financial and technological) that AUKUS will have at its disposal over the coming decades, shared by three nations with shared interests that also have long-running bilateral alliances (Australia-U.S. and U.S.-UK), AUKUS may turn out to be the most consequential of these minilateral groupings.

Two Pillars of AUKUS

AUKUS' initial joint statement in 2021 discussed two key components or pillars of AUKUS: SSNs and advanced capabilities. The first pillar, equipping Australia with SSNs as soon as possible and jointly building a new class of SSNs, comprises the centerpiece of AUKUS and has a roadmap for completion in several phases across the next three decades from now until 2050. The second pillar has received less attention but could prove to be more important in the long run as the fourth industrial revolution deepens and civilian-based technological innovations in areas such as AI, autonomous systems, and quantum computing, provide new capabilities for military power and advantage.[10] It comports with the global trend of competing for pre-eminence in emerging technology, whereby technological superiority translates to military dominance.[11] The two pillars of AUKUS are not mutually exclusive as they both entail the integration of the defense industrial and technological bases of Australia, the UK, and the US, and require trilateral technology sharing to develop leading-edge defense capabilities.

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Pillar I

Turning to SSNs, the roadmap that was publicly disclosed at Point Loma details a multi-phased approach to building up undersea deterrence capabilities within AUKUS.[12] The first stage, which is already underway, involves the embedding of Australian personnel with U.S. and UK crews on SSNs and naval bases and visits to Australian ports by American SSNs and is intended to provide Australia with the training and skills to operate and maintain SSNs. From 2027 the next phase begins, whereby the rotational presence of one UK and four U.S. nuclear powered submarines will be established at the refurbished HMAS Stirling near Perth in Western Australia. This complies with Australia's policy of no foreign bases on its territory and will further support Australia as its builds its capacity to operate its own fleet of SSNs.

From the early 2030s, Australia is set to acquire three to five Virginia-class SSNs, which the U.S. will lease from its own fleet, pending approval in Congress. This is an important stopgap measure since Australia's existing Collins fleet of six diesel-electric submarines are due for retirement.[13] The leasing of the Virginia class submarines fills the gap that exists between the retirement of the Collins fleet and the introduction of the SSN-AUKUS. The final stage of the plan entails the joint development of a new class of SSNs – SSN-AUKUS – based on next-generation technology, a combination of UK submarine design and U.S. defense technology. These are intended to be the future attack

submarines for both the UK and Australia, built in British and Australian naval shipyards.[14] The first boats are expected enter service in the UK in the late 2030s and the early 2040s in Australia.

Pillar II

Advanced capabilities and technology sharing, the second pillar of AUKUS, is more challenging to pull off, but could produce the most significant gains. This pillar entails the trilateral sharing and development of dual-use and military applications of advanced technologies such as AI, quantum computing, cyber technology, electronic warfare, autonomous systems, undersea capabilities, hypersonic and counter-hypersonic technology, and information sharing.[15] It requires the translation of disruptive technologies and services created by civilian research institutions and companies into military capabilities and operational doctrines, in other words, civil-military collaboration and cooperation.

If successful, the trilateral integration of defense industrial and technological bases and supply chains would enable seamless collaboration and interoperability among AUKUS partners. Additional benefits of technological collaboration include cost-sharing, the overall expansion of defense manufacturing capacity, and the scale up of efforts to develop and manufacture advanced weapons systems spread across three nations, which has the potential to capture economies of scale.[16] Beyond this, little detail has been provided on specific initiatives and technologies for pillar two, which is understandable since cutting-edge defense technologies are rarely discussed in the public domain.

Strategic Rationale

At a general level, the rationale behind AUKUS is to forge a closer defense and security partnership between Australia, the UK, and the U.S. to address common challenges, particularly related to China's rising power and influence, and enhance regional security and stability in the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS is also emblematic of a deeper shift that is occurring from the U.S. unilaterally upholding the balance-of-power to a regional order in which allies, such as Australia, the UK, and Japan, pay increasing roles in collectively upholding the balance-of-power in the Indo-Pacific.[17] Since American primacy is not what it once was, U.S. national strategy is being recalibrated to focus on enhancing cooperation with, and strengthening the position of, its key allies especially when it comes to counterbalancing China. Importantly, the creation of AUKUS politically signals that AUKUS countries intend to defend their interests and uphold the liberal international order.

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In addition, each pillar of AUKUS has its own strategic logic that is consistent with this broader rationale. In Pillar I, SSNs are intended to be a deterrent in the South China Sea, where China operates attack submarines, and are considered potentially decisive in the event of a cross-strait Chinese attack on Taiwan. Undersea capabilities are considered critical in the Indo-Pacific context, where the strategic focus is primarily on maritime security. In terms of the role of the HMAS Stirling naval base in Perth, it is beyond the range of Chinese long-range missiles (unlike U.S. Naval Base Guam) and provides the U.S. and its allies a strategic location in the Indian Ocean. While the Indian Ocean is not home to flashpoint locations

that could lead to warfare, it is becoming another site of strategic competition among the great powers of the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, it contains three major strategic chokepoints—the Malacca Strait, Strait of Hormuz, and Bab el-Mandeb—blockage of which would disrupt huge volumes of trade and energy transportation between the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia.[18]

Pillar II deepens the relationship among AUKUS members, with the goal of achieving high levels of interoperability of defense systems among the three allies, creating a more cohesive strategic alignment underpinned by seamless collaboration when it comes to technology sharing and the implementation of security and defense policies. In terms of advanced capabilities, Pillar II is also responding to China's MCF, which has made great strides in recent years. According to ASPI's Critical Technology Tracker China holds the lead in 19 of 23 critical technologies that are relevant to AUKUS' advanced capabilities areas, dominating hypersonics, electronic warfare, and autonomous underwater vehicles and leading by narrower margin on advanced cyber technologies, advanced robotics, post-quantum cryptography, and quantum communications.[19] Since cutting-edge technologies play pivotal roles in enhancing military capabilities and directly translate into strategic advantage over rivals, civil-military cooperation is becoming a core military-technology development strategy for great powers.[20]

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Building Innovation Power through AUKUS

While there are elements of China's national strategy of MCF that are considered unique, the idea of civil-military integration is not new. For instance, the U.S. and Russia have extensive histories, stretching back to the Cold War, of leveraging civilian technologies for military purposes, and Israel also has strong interlinkages between its military and civilian sectors.[21] MCF as defined by China is distinctive in being a comprehensive top-down state-directed policy that aims to create a dense ecosystem of military and commercial enterprises/civilian research institutions that support and enhance national defense capabilities. In most other cases, collaboration between military and civilian sectors tends to be more market driven. While governments may encourage collaboration, it is not centrally planned or mandated nor does it entail the deep integration or 'fusion' of military and civilian sectors, rather such collaboration consists of voluntary and flexible initiatives in specific areas of mutual interest.

The trilateral pooling of advanced capabilities under AUKUS is intended to provide this strategic partnership with a decisive military edge over China in the decades to come. Given China's early lead in numerous advanced capabilities crucial for future military superiority, this endeavor is regarded as urgent. China's MCF strategy is not appropriate for AUKUS, instead the success of Pillar II requires the creation of 'long-term partnerships – among governments, industry leaders and civil society… to foster synergy and innovation and allow the private sector to generate new concepts and ideas for advancing defense capabilities.'[22] The keys to success in technology sharing and civil-military cooperation within AUKUS countries are moonshot thinking, speed and flexibility (especially in the defense sector), embrace of risk, and of course, effective public-private partnerships. The methods

and protocols for technology sharing under AUKUS face their own set of opportunities and challenges.

The most significant challenges for military technology sharing under AUKUS are regulatory and bureaucratic. A widely recognized obstacle at present concerns striking the right balance between knowledge sharing and safeguarding national security interests, that is, between technology transfer and export control regulations.[23] The International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) constitutes the American regulatory regime to restrict and control the export of defense and military-related technologies to ensure that advanced military capabilities do not end up in the wrong hands. These regulations are complex, time-consuming, and costly for organizations that wish to export their technologies to navigate. This is acknowledged to be a significant barrier to international military technology sharing hence, the White House and Congress are currently working on ITAR reform to create exemptions for technology transfers that occur under AUKUS.[24]

At the domestic level, more permissive and efficient bureaucratic environments are needed to enable effective collaboration between civilian organizations and the defense sector. Bureaucratic red-tape and cumbersome processes within the relevant government agencies drastically slow down information-sharing and approvals, which is suboptimal in the context of developing emerging military technologies, where speed matters. Within China, bureaucratic obstacles were also recognized as a problem for its MCF strategy; in 2017 the Central Commission for MCF Development was established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to centralize authority within this area, enable greater top-down control, and remove the institutional barriers to policy development and implementation across government, military, and industry.[25]

AUKUS' approach to defense cooperation is distinctive in several significant ways including: Its relative exclusivity within a trilateral partnership that builds on extant and longstanding bilateral

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defense alliances between the participating countries; focus on advanced military technology, particularly the development of a new class of SSNs; and, integration of defense industrial bases, all set against the backdrop of increasingly intense geopolitical competition and contestation in the Indo-Pacific region. While AUKUS faces various challenges, these distinctive qualities are also key strengths and provide opportunities to achieve a level of defense integration among allies perhaps beyond what is typically achieved in the context of international defense cooperation.

Given its small size compared to broader alliances such as NATO, AUKUS has the potential to pursue deeper and comprehensive defense industrial integration, achieving higher levels of interoperability, interchangeability, and coordination, along with more streamlined decision-making. Such integration builds on a solid foundation created by the long history of security cooperation between the participating countries, especially the U.S. and Australia. That being said, expanding Pillar II to additional countries is considered a possibility, the prime candidates being New Zealand and Canada (the two other members of the Five Eyes alliance). The addition of Japan has also been recommended

by some analysts, given its 'alliance with the U.S., technological and industrial capabilities, and geopolitical interests'.[26]

And finally, while most other military partnerships entail collaboration on a wide range of defense capabilities, AUKUS has a specific focus on cutting-edge technologies that create military advantage. This fits within the bigger story of the race for technological superiority that is occurring at the global level. Although the nexus between technological innovation and global domination is nothing new, the speed at which innovation is happening today is unprecedented, especially when it comes to AI, which has vast innovation potential by virtue of its generative nature.[27]

Conclusion

Criticisms and contrasting perspectives on AUKUS, ranging from the risk that it will escalate animosities with China and exacerbate regional tensions through to its potential to undermine principles of regional multilateralism and inclusivity in the Indo-Pacific, have been discussed extensively.[28] However, it is important to consider such viewpoints within a broader context. AUKUS and other Indo-Pacific minilaterals have emerged as a response to the limitations of extant multilateralism and bilateralism in addressing China's growing regional influence and stabilizing the Indo-Pacific order. The failures of existing approaches have prompted the emergence of new strategic alignments that offer more focused and tailored responses to the complex security challenges of the region; responses that require deeper levels of coordination and integration than broader multilateralism can realistically generate. Furthermore, AUKUS' emphasis on the development of advanced capabilities and technology sharing recognizes the significance of innovation in maintaining a competitive military edge in the Indo-Pacific.

AUKUS is responding to the increasingly volatile Indo-Pacific security order by combining conventional deterrence measures with advanced capabilities and defense integration. Hence, it represents an ambitious and transformative approach to international military cooperation that, if successful, could have far-reaching consequences for regional security. Whether this can be achieved remains to be seen as it is still early days for AUKUS and the specifics for Pillars I and II will be continually reviewed and revised over the coming decades in response to changing international and domestic political contexts. The expansion of Pillar II to include other likeminded countries such as New Zealand, Canada, and Japan could further enhance technological innovation and collaboration within this strategic partnership but may also have potential drawbacks that need to be explored and weighed against the potential benefits.

Author –

Dr Monique Taylor *is a University Lecturer in World Politics at the University of Helsinki and Research Affiliate in the Lau China Institute, King's College London.*

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