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**The Impact of AUKUS**  
on Strategic Stability in the Asia Pacific

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# The Impact of AUKUS on Strategic Stability in the Asia Pacific

Arooj Fatima Kazmi<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

AUKUS, the trilateral partnership that the United States and United Kingdom have created with Australia, affects regional strategic stability and rebreaks the spirit of a taboo that forbids nuclear weapon states from transferring nuclear weapons and related technologies to states either party or non-party to the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. The NPT-based nuclear non-proliferation regime is rooted in the aspiration of improving global security, reducing the risk of nuclear war, building strategic stability, and ultimately disarmament of all nuclear-armed states. The transfer of nuclear-powered attack submarines and disruptive technologies to Australia is clearly bound to increase strategic instability and foment further nuclear proliferation. AUKUS will also fuel great power rivalry in and outside the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Region. This paper examines the implications of AUKUS in the Asia Pacific region, particularly, strategic stability, and the non-proliferation regime. A qualitative case study approach is adopted. Data has been derived from official documents, journal articles, books, and newspaper articles and analyzed through the balance of power paradigm.

**Keywords:** AUKUS, Maritime Security, Balance of Power, Strategic Stability, Nuclear Proliferation.

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## Introduction

In September 2021, the US, UK, and Australia formed AUKUS as a trilateral security alliance to “bolster their allied deterrence and defense capabilities”<sup>2</sup> in the Asia Pacific. China considers it has been created against them and the Troika of AUKUS considers that the partnership is aimed at enhancing their maritime security and stability in the so-called Indo-Pacific region, the latter being a re-Christening of an age-old term, Asia Pacific, that most of the regional states still subscribe to. Apart from the transfer of nuclear submarine technology, the deal *inter alia* encompasses high-end artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and underwater sensors and drones.<sup>3</sup> Nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) have an advantage over conventional ones in terms of speed, stealth, and endurance.<sup>4</sup> This matter has become a pacing controversy and source of speculation. Some leading experts from AUKUS states have argued that countries may take precedent from the deal to develop nuclear weapons, as Australia is a non-nuclear weapon state.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, it is not the first time that regional stability has been undermined by extra-regional powers under the rationale of enhancing maritime security and stability. Likewise, AUKUS is not the first to violate that so-called nuclear non-proliferation taboo.

In 1988, India leased a nuclear-powered submarine – an SSBN – from Russia for three years.<sup>6</sup> Later, in 2012, India leased another SSN – a nuclear attack submarine – for ten years.<sup>7</sup>

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2. Bruce Jones et al., “Around the Halls: AUKUS Defines an Emerging Alliance at Sea,” Brookings, March 15, 2023.

3. Tom Corben, Ashley Townshend, and Susannah Paton, “What is the AUKUS Partnership?” United States Studies Centre, September 16, 2021, [https://www.usssc.edu.au/analysis/explain-er-what-is-the-aukus-partnership?gclid=Cj0KCQjw7PCjBhDwARIsANo7Cgl2OJd8v-gt-FenswFxN0cWijI4kJLKqOTsf\\_E0VXZTn6zTpFom7V9oaAsX1EALw\\_wcB](https://www.usssc.edu.au/analysis/explain-er-what-is-the-aukus-partnership?gclid=Cj0KCQjw7PCjBhDwARIsANo7Cgl2OJd8v-gt-FenswFxN0cWijI4kJLKqOTsf_E0VXZTn6zTpFom7V9oaAsX1EALw_wcB).

4. “Ask an Expert: Why Are Submarines so Important?” UNSW Canberra, n.d., <https://www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/newsroom/news/ask-expert-why-are-submarines-so-important>.

5. James M. Acton, “Why the AUKUS Submarine Deal Is Bad for Nonproliferation – And What to Do About It,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 21, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/09/21/why-aukus-submarine-deal-is-bad-for-nonproliferation-and-what-to-do-about-it-pub-85399>.

6. Sandeep Unnithan, “Why Russia is Offering India Old Submarines,” India Today, August 5, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/why-russia-is-offering-india-old-submarines-1836560-2021-08-04>.

7. Peter Suci, “Russia Allows India to Lease Nuclear Submarines. Here’s Why,” July 5, 2022,

In 2021, India leased another SSN that will be delivered in 2025. The lease period is usually a decade long and extended for another five years. Russia has also been the major source of supply of high-end military technology to India, including nuclear-capable weapon systems.

This active proliferation of nuclear technology by a state bound by the NPT has allowed India – a non-NPT state – to forge ahead in building a fleet of submarines that will carry an arsenal of more than 100 submarine-launched ballistic missiles and nuclear-capable cruise missiles by late 2030s or early 2040s. India claims that it is building this capability



Image: Yassen Class Nuclear Submarine. Russian Navy. Source: <https://www.19fortyfive.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Yasen-class-Submarine.jpg>

indigenously but there are no verification means to prove this claim. While India's submarine development program has spanned more than three decades, Australian capability is projected to be built at a faster pace and with identical timelines.<sup>8</sup> It is not a coincidence that the two developments seem complementary.

While this leasing may seem like a mere business transaction worth a few billion dollars, the proliferation of SSBN and SSNs has clearly destabilized South Asian strategic balance. Besides Western technology, India has acquired S-400 surface to air missiles, BrahMos missile technology, and Su-30 aircraft from Russia to boost its strategic capabilities. Perhaps seen only as business deals, these did not foresee that its recipient would actually be a Trojan Horse of adversaries. These changes in international relations, strategic stability, and so-called nonproliferation regime indicate that these exceptions aggravate security dilemmas and will compel the affected states to take suitable measures in their self-defense.

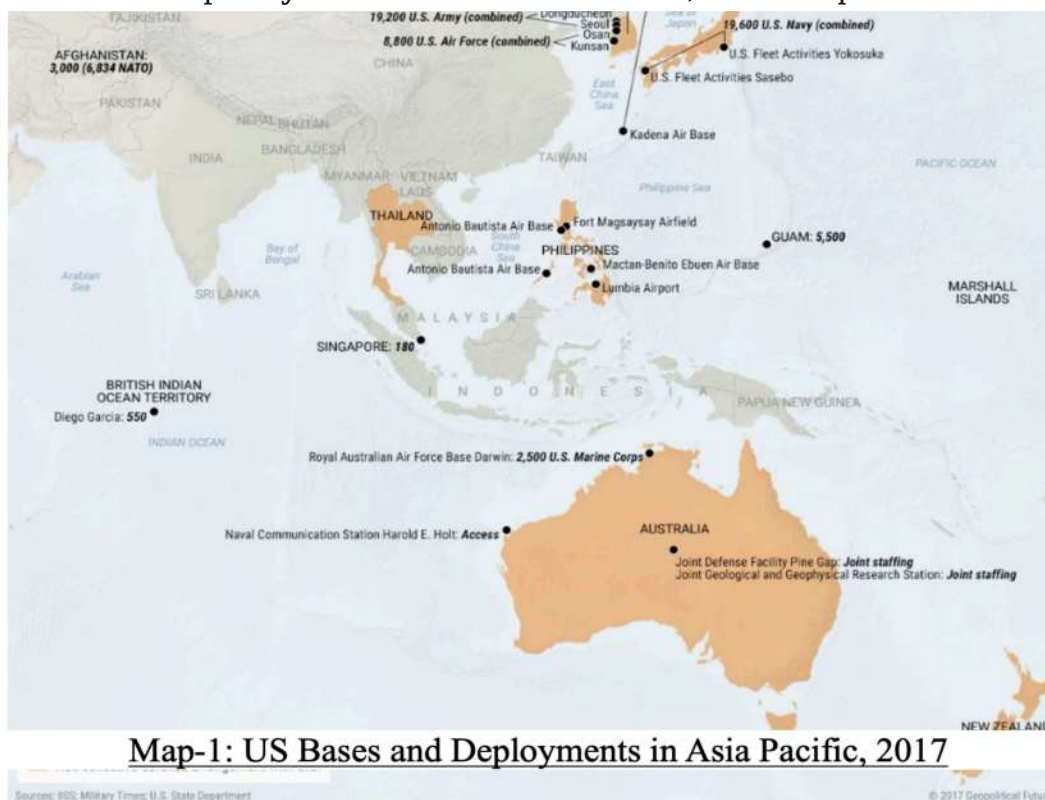
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<https://www.19fortyfive.com/2022/07/russia-allows-india-to-lease-nuclear-submarines-heres-why/>.

8. Jones et al., "Around the Halls."

## Raison d'état of AUKUS

The AUKUS partners contend that the rationale for the initiative is three-pronged: to promote a “Free and Open Pacific” and deter threats to the international order, primarily posed by China, to modernize the US alliances in the Atlantic and Pacific regions by “increasing [their] combined capacity in the undersea domain,” and help Australia de-



fend its maritime trade routes.<sup>9</sup> It is projected as a means of “enhancing deterrence and promoting stability in the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>10</sup> Whether AUKUS will enhance regional security is up for debate.<sup>11</sup>

Australia canceled the previous USD 90 billion deal with France over Barracuda-class submarines due to a more lucrative

9. The White House, “Background Press Call by Senior Administration Officials on the AUKUS Announcement,” March 13, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/03/13/background-press-call-by-senior-administration-officials-on-the-aukus-announcement/>.

10. The White House, “Fact Sheet: Trilateral Australia-UK-US Partnership on Nuclear-Powered Submarines,” March 13, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/03/13/fact-sheet-trilateral-australia-uk-us-partnership-on-nuclear-powered-submarines/>.

11. Candace Rondeaux and Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Some Awkward Truths about AUKUS,” Security and Defense Plus, February 22, 2023, <https://securityanddefenceplus.plusalliance.org/essays/some-awkward-truths-about-aukus/>.

deal with the US and UK, which satiates its old ambition<sup>12</sup> to build nuclear weapons. They wrapped this interest in projecting the perception that China's naval modernization and "assertive actions" in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait have "significantly altered regional security dynamics."<sup>13</sup>

AUKUS will materialize in three phases. While learning on American and British submarines initially, Australia will ultimately construct eight AUKUS-class submarines by early 2040s.<sup>14</sup> Once fully functional, AUKUS will be the sea-leg of air, land, and space-based military axis in the closest possible geographical proximity of China (See Map-1).<sup>15</sup>

The geopolitical dimensions of AUKUS lend salience to how it links to maritime security. A view echoes this observation, "Maritime security is intrinsically geopolitical since it is about projecting public power beyond one's external boundary within the 'global' maritime domain."<sup>16</sup>

Other experts also highlight the importance of geopolitical developments in the sea for maritime security, "The contemporary maritime security agenda should be understood as an interlinked set of challenges of growing global, regional, and national significance."<sup>17</sup>

The stability and security of sea lines of communication (SLOC) in the Asia Pacific is vital as it is tied to global trade and prosperity. The region's maritime trade accounted for 41 percent of total goods loaded in 2020

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12. Australia had a chemical weapons capability during World War II and collaborated with the UK on nuclear testing. It claims that it has no longer has an interest in WMD, including nuclear weapons. But there is a lobby that still espouses such ambition. See Benedict Brook, "Australia's Secret Plans to Have Its Own Nuclear Arsenal," News, July 11, 2017.

13. Ian Storey and William Choong, "The AUKUS Announcement and Southeast Asia: An Assessment of Regional Responses and Concerns," ISEAS Perspective (March 29, 2023), [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2023\\_23.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2023_23.pdf).

14. The White House, "Fact Sheet: Trilateral Australia-UK-US Partnership."

15. George Friedman and Jacob L. Shapiro, "The US is Not Abandoning Asia," Geopolitical Futures, June 22, 2020, <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/the-us-is-not-abandoning-asia/>.

16. Basil Germond, "The Geopolitical Dimension of Maritime Security," *Marine Policy* 54 (April 1, 2015): 137–42, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2014.12.013>.

17. Christian Bueger, Timothy Edmunds, and Barry J. Ryan, "Maritime Security: The Uncharted Politics of the Global Sea," *International Affairs* 95, no. 5 (September 1, 2019): 971–78, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz145>.

globally, and it has eight out of the top ten ports in the world.<sup>18</sup>

### **Balance of Power and Strategic Stability**

All interpretations of the balance of power concept are premised on how equilibrium is restored through various means, such as the formation of counterbalancing alliances, to address the imbalances in material and military capabilities among great powers.<sup>19</sup> Strategic stability, arms control, and deterrence stability are thus interrelated paradigms of the balance of power. Amid anarchy, states form security coalitions against powerful nations to survive in the system. The states thus take necessary measures to make their political ends meet, which include proliferation of any technologies to allies and their denial to their adversaries. Balance of power is rooted in this realistic interpretation of global politics and is an enduring concept<sup>20</sup> and AUKUS as a means to improve maritime security fits the framework. In a similar vein, any defensive measures taken by Asia Pacific regional states like China and their allies would appear completely legitimate. However, the consequent security dilemma and competition is as enduring as the very concept of balance of power.

In its March 2023 Integrated Review of Foreign and Defense Policy, the UK conveyed the need to “shape” its strategic environment in partnership with like-minded states; China was described as an “epoch-defining challenge” to the world order.<sup>21</sup> The 2022 US National Defense Strategy refers to China as a “pacing challenge” that requires “sustained and strengthened deterrence.”<sup>22</sup> The “PRC challenge” is a strategic priority for the US. The text of the AUKUS meetings too conveys that the deal seeks to enter a new phase of geopo-

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18. Mohid Iftikhar and Muhammad Usama Khan, “AUKUS and Its Implications on Maritime Security,” *Geopolitical Monitor*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/aukus-and-its-implications-on-maritime-security/>.

19. Steven E. Lobell, “Balance of Power Theory,” *Oxford Bibliographies*, November 25, 2014, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199743292/obo-9780199743292-0083.xml>.

20. Meicen Sun, “Balance of Power Theory in Today’s International System,” *E-International Relations*, February 12, 2014, <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/02/12/balance-of-power-theory-in-today-international-system/>.

21. Cabinet Office, “Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World,” *GOV.UK*, May 16, 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world>.

22. The White House, “National Security Strategy,” October 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

litical competition in the maritime domain.<sup>23</sup> It also lies within the US Indo-Pacific Strategy.<sup>24</sup> By enhancing its navy's access to Australia, the US hopes to complicate China's security calculus and create a deterrent effect.<sup>25</sup>

Australia aspires for "strategic control" of the maritime domain. While stressing that Australia is "heavily reliant" on its maritime environment for its "national survival and economic wellbeing," a 2003 defense White Paper defines strategic control as:

A proactive strategy to maximize our freedom of maneuver in the air and sea approaches while denying freedom of action to a potential adversary. The ability to assert our will over an adversary in time and space and deny an adversary's ability to position for or conduct offensive operations against Australia and its interests. The projection of power into the region to support our national interests.<sup>26</sup>

While the AUKUS pact may enable Australia to realize its maritime security vision, it has thrust the state into the unfurling great power rivalry between the US and China. Despite its ideological compatibility and long-standing alliance with the US, Australia's economy has been dependent on China.<sup>27</sup> Relations between Australia and China, however, took a dip since the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>28</sup> Even some Australians have questioned why their country is "buying a weapon expressly designed to hem China's navy in along its coastline and

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23. The White House, "Readout of AUKUS Joint Steering Group Meetings," December 17, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/17/readout-of-aucus-joint-steering-group-meetings/>.

24. The White House, "Indo-Pacific Strategy," February 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

25. Nick Childs, Euan Graham, and Ben Schreer, "The AUKUS Plan: A Grand Bargain with Significant Risks," IISS, March 16, 2023, <https://www.iiss.org/en/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/03/the-aucus-plan-a-grand-bargain-with-significant-risks/>.

26. Australian Department of Defense, "Inquiry into Australia's Maritime Strategy," Australian Parliament House, March 12, 2003, [https://www.aph.gov.au/~media/wopapub/house/committee/jfadt/Maritime/report/report\\_pdf.ashx](https://www.aph.gov.au/~media/wopapub/house/committee/jfadt/Maritime/report/report_pdf.ashx).

27. James Laurenceson, "Australian Reliance on Chinese Exports an Economic Reality," East Asia Forum, February 21, 2023, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/02/22/australian-reliance-on-chinese-exports-an-economic-reality/>; Atia Ali Kazmi, *The Road to Balance in Asia Pacific*, (Karachi: Paramount Publisher, 2021).

28. "The Deterioration of Australia–China Relations," IISS, June 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2020/australia-china-relations>.



strike targets deep inside Chinese territory.”<sup>29</sup>

Australia has realized that the US will be involved in the Asia Pacific region for the long haul. The AUKUS deal is also noteworthy since it is the first time, since the 1958 agreement with the UK, that the US has shared its nuclear submarine technology with any state.<sup>30</sup> Once Australia acquires nuclear-powered submarines, the maritime security dynamics in the Asia Pacific are bound to undergo momentous change. It may broaden the risk of accidental war, as China or North Korea would be unable to ascertain whether a cruise missile launched from the Australian submarine is nuclear until it detonated.<sup>31</sup>

The US perceives China’s naval preponderance in the South China Sea. Contrary to the facts, it asserts that China has the “largest navy in the world” with an “overall battle force of approximately 340 ships and submarines.”<sup>32</sup> However, this quantitative assertion fails to account for significant differences in force structures, where China relies on smaller classes of ships, and the “incomparable regional ally differential” that the US maintains.<sup>33</sup> Covert US involvement in other regions through regime change has been replaced by the establishment of plurilateral or minilateral alliances and strategic geopolitical convergences.<sup>34</sup>

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29. Gideon Rachman, “AUKUS, the Anglosphere and the Return of Great Power Rivalry,” *Financial Times*, March 13, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/e4abd866-54cb-4923-9a66-ebb5b5ed67bf>.

30. Punsara Amarasinghe, “AUKUS: The Latest Tango for Balance of Power in International Relations,” *Voice of International Affairs*, October 1, 2021, <https://internationalaffairsbd.com/aukus-the-latest-tango-for-balance-of-power-in-international-relations/>.

31. Tanya Oglivie-White and John Gower, “A Deeper Dive into AUKUS: Risks and Benefits for the Asia-Pacific,” *APLN*, October 2021, <https://cms.apln.network/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/A-Deeper-Dive-into-AUKUS-1.pdf>.

32. “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China,” US Department of Defense, 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Nov/29/2003122279/-1/-1/1/2022-%20MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>.

33. Benjamin Mainardi, “Yes, China Has the World’s Largest Navy. That Matters Less Than You Might Think,” *The Diplomat*, April 7, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/yes-china-has-the-worlds-largest-navy-that-matters-less-than-you-might-think/>.

34. Rashi Randev, “Reshaping the Indo-Pacific Construct through Strategic Geopolitical Convergences: AUKUS as the Harbinger of Multipolar Hegemony in the Region,” *Air University*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2904531/reshaping-the-indo-pacific-construct-through-strategic-geopolitical-convergence/>.

Nevertheless, states seek to maximize their power, and China must at least defend itself against a growing number of states that seek to contain its economic rise through military means. Therefore, the measures it takes in self-defense are not an exception to the rules-based order.<sup>35</sup> The right of self-defense is guaranteed by the UN Charter and supersedes any interpretation of a rules-based order. China undoubtedly holds a great power status owing to its rising economic and military power. According to a 2022 report, the US spent 39 percent of global defense spending, amounting to USD 877 billion, while China followed at second place with 13 percent spending – USD 292 billion.<sup>36</sup> After the US announced so-called Indo-Pacific Strategy, China and the Solomon Islands signed a security agreement. China is also looking to strengthen its partnership with Russia, as seen by joint naval exercises.<sup>37</sup> While these developments reflect the balance of power dynamics, the absence of complex balancing in the Asia Pacific may be attributed to the deepened economic interdependence that China has built with its balancers, including the US, India, and Australia, and its development-oriented grand strategy.<sup>38</sup>

In a historical exception, China is building its global power status based on economy and not military might. Beijing claims and projects notions such as “common destiny of all,” “there is enough space [for growth] for all in Asia-Pacific,” and “peaceful” rise. It has not militarily intervened in any country and is an active participant in UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations. Also, China has not developed a military alliance in response to Indo-Pacific Strategy, Quad or AUKUS. A clear inference emerges that AUKUS is apparently one of the military responses to a predominantly geo-economic development. This unequal competition is likely to increase strategic instability and risk of war beyond the Asia Pacific region.

The AUKUS is likely to impact South Asia because India is part of

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35. Zulfqar Khan and Fouzia Amin, “‘Pivot’ and ‘Rebalancing’: Implications for Asia-Pacific Region,” *Policy Perspectives* 12, no. 2 (January 1, 2015): 3–28, <https://doi.org/10.13169/poli-pers.12.2.0003>.

36. Brian Bonner, “China’s Military Puts Indo-Pacific on Edge,” *GIS Reports*, June 1, 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-indo-pacific-military/>.

37. “China, Russia Hold Joint Naval Exercises to ‘Deepen’ Partnership,” *Al Jazeera*, December 20, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/20/china-russia-to-hold-joint-naval-drills-to-deepen-partnership>.

38. Zhen Han and T. V. Paul, “China’s Rise and Balance of Power Politics,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 13, no. 1 (2020): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poz018>.

Quad in which two of the AUKUS states – the US and Australia – are key partners and New Delhi is being projected as the “net security provider” in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Both Australian and Indian navies regularly participate in Malabar exercise<sup>39</sup> in South Asian littoral waters and their increasing interoperability and technology transfers will also heighten Pakistan’s security dilemma.

Although Pakistan has security concerns with respect to India, the latter’s joint naval operations with AUKUS states can create incidents that can lead to crises and inadvertent and accidental escalation. AUKUS states provide very little visibility of the nature and extent of their cooperation with India, and this can affect strategic stability in the region, especially if India takes a risk either without taking its partners into confidence or rejects their advice. One incident in particular stands out in the pattern of Indian irresponsible behavior. In 2018<sup>40</sup> and reportedly during 2019 standoff over Kashmir, oft referred to as Pulwama-Balakot crisis, India took out deterrence patrol and could have escalated.

Unless Pakistan develops a submarine-based assured second-strike capability, the nuclear risk and strategic instability will remain high in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). India is likely to complete its fleet of six to eight nuclear submarines by late 2030s or early 2040s. If Pakistan does not have a matching capability, India’s propensity for first strike and pre-emption will increase. Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD), improved space-based capabilities and increased intelligence interoperability with Quad will increase New Delhi’s confidence and risk-taking behavior. To restore strategic balance, stabilize deterrence, and reduce the risk of war, Pakistan must develop matching capabilities at fast track. Poor economy, technological denial regime, and other restrictions on Pakistan will make safeguarding maritime security interests and deterrence stability herculean efforts. 95 percent of Pakistan’s trade is seaborne,

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39. Dinakar Peri, “Australia to Host Malabar Naval Exercise for First Time This August,” *The Hindu*, February 21, 2023, [https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/australia-to-host-malabar-naval-exercise-for-first-time-this-august/article66537072.ece?\\_\\_cf\\_chl\\_tk=qLoFBI7Vwqp6R-TAAczDfo5ZblB15q71DPIfmDY5F7xs-1691317115-0-gaNycGzNDDs](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/australia-to-host-malabar-naval-exercise-for-first-time-this-august/article66537072.ece?__cf_chl_tk=qLoFBI7Vwqp6R-TAAczDfo5ZblB15q71DPIfmDY5F7xs-1691317115-0-gaNycGzNDDs). Australia was included as a member of the Exercise Malabar in 2020 amid India-China standoff in Eastern Ladakh.

40. Rajat Pandit, “Nuclear Submarines INS Arihant Completes Patrol, Country’s N-triad Operational,” *The Times of India*, November 6, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/as-nuclear-sub-arihant-returns-after-first-deterrence-patrol-indias-nuclear-triad-complete/articleshow/66515624.cms>.

and its comparative naval military footprint is insignificant.

### **Non-Proliferation**

Amongst proliferation concerns, AUKUS partners argue that Australia has an exemplary record in nuclear non-proliferation.<sup>41</sup> It is a signatory to the NPT, a founding member of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and has implemented the IAEA's Additional Protocol. Moreover, they argue that they plan to "[set] the highest nuclear non-proliferation standard."<sup>42</sup>

However, Australia has a history in the realm of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), its non-proliferation behavior is anomalous and there is an underlying proliferation ambition that AUKUS can serve. Australia had a chemical weapons capability during World War II and collaborated with the UK on nuclear testing.<sup>43</sup> It claims that it no longer has an interest in WMD, including nuclear weapons. However, there is a lobby that still espouses such ambition.<sup>44</sup> It must be noted that Australia did attempt to acquire nuclear weapons in the past, with three notable instances revealed through declassified documents: in 1958, 1961, and 1973.<sup>45</sup> Australia championed non-proliferation regime but is a leading partner with India and supplies uranium to New Delhi under an exceptional waiver given by the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), which has been challenged even by Australian experts<sup>46</sup> for risk of proliferation.<sup>47</sup>

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41. The White House, "Background Press Call on AUKUS," 15 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/09/15/background-press-call-onaukus/>.

42. The White House, "Fact Sheet: Trilateral Australia-UK-US Partnership."

43. Australia: Country Spotlight," NTI, <https://www.nti.org/countries/australia/#:~:text=Australia%20is%20a%20party%20to%20all%20major%20nonproliferation,testing%2C%20Australia%20no%20longer%20maintains%20offensive%20WMD%20programs.>

44. Brook, "Australia's Secret Plans."

45. Jim Walsh, "Surprise Down Under: The Secret History of Australia's Nuclear Ambitions," *The Nonproliferation Review*, 1995, <https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/npr/walsh51.pdf>.

46. John Carlson, "India's Nuclear Safeguards: Not Fit for Purpose," *Belfer Center*, January 2018, <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/India%E2%80%99s%20Nuclear%20Safeguards%20-%20Not%20Fit%20for%20Purpose.pdf>.

47. Mansoor Ahmed, "India's Nuclear Exceptionalism: Fissile Material, Fuel Cycles, and Safeguards," *Belfer Center*, May 2017, <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/India%27s%20Nuclear%20Exceptionalism.pdf>; Matthew Bunn et al., "Limiting Transfers of Enrichment and Reprocessing Technology: Issues, Constraints, Options," *Belfer Center*, May 2011, <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/MTA-NSG-report-color.pdf>.

The Troika of AUKUS states is giving assurances that Australia will not acquire nuclear weapons or produce its own nuclear fuel for the SSNs, and the nuclear fuel in SSNs will be welded power units that will not have to be refueled. They further stress that Australia will comply with its commitments under the IAEA's Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA) and Additional Protocol (AP).

China has not hidden its displeasure over the AUKUS deal and considers it highly irresponsible.<sup>48</sup> Beijing contends that AUKUS would bring “five harms” to the Asia Pacific region: nuclear proliferation, renewed arms racing, undermined regional prosperity and stability, sabotage of the building of a regional nuclear-weapon-free zone, and the revival of Cold War mentality.<sup>49</sup> China contends that the three partner states are furthering their “selfish geopolitical agenda,” while endangering nuclear non-proliferation and “coercing” the IAEA.<sup>50</sup>

Russia, too, is strongly opposed to the trilateral initiative, stressing that it is a “pseudo-civic partnership” that is “really aimed at fostering confrontation and deterrence, rather than the [purported goals of] developing economic integration and conflict-free joint cooperation.”<sup>51</sup> It has also shown concern over the possible expansion of the partnership to “AUKUS Plus,” which may include Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand.

Regional countries have nuclear proliferation, arms race concerns, and the fear of increased external interference. The notion of the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality in Southeast Asia (ZOPFAN) and Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (SEANWFZ) conveys a sense of wariness towards the influence of external powers

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48. Catherine Wong, “China Hits out at ‘Highly Irresponsible’ AUKUS Defence Pact between US, Britain and Australia and Warns of Pacific Arms Race,” South China Morning Post, September 16, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3149052/china-hits-out-highly-irresponsible-aukus-defence-pact-between>.

49. Zhangrui, ed., “AUKUS Nuclear Submarine Deal Brings Five Harms to Region, Says Chinese FM,” CCTV, September 30, 2021, <https://english.cctv.com/2021/09/30/ARTI3k-m4A4X3hPBlqcuq4qx210930.shtml#:~:text=AUKUS%20nuclear%20submarine%20deal%20brings%20five%20harms%20to,conversation%20with%20the%20Malaysian%20and%20Bruneian%20foreign%20ministers>.

50. “China Urges AUKUS Countries to Stop Putting Geopolitical Agenda above Obligations,” Xinhua, March 2017, <https://english.news.cn/20230317/02f59c64a6734a27a7c5d-458fea5f6ac/c.html>.

51. “AUKUS Expansion Plans Cause Concern in Moscow – Russian Diplomat,” TASS, March 16, 2023, <https://tass.com/defense/1589921>.

and nuclear proliferation in the region.<sup>52</sup> As a consequence of this proliferation, the risk of the blockage of maritime routes, such as Indonesia's archipelagic sea lanes, in the case of a conflict is just one of the concerns.<sup>53</sup>

Australia has reiterated its non-proliferation commitments, stressing that it will not pursue uranium enrichment, welded power units will make the removal of nuclear material "extremely difficult," Australia does not possess or seek uranium processing facilities, and, lastly, it will continue to engage with the IAEA to implement additional safeguard measures.<sup>54</sup> A pertinent question remains: will Australia eventually have to process and enrich uranium?<sup>55</sup> Whether Australia will be able to dispose of "high-level" nuclear waste is also questioned.<sup>56</sup>

Six states operate SSNs: the US, China, Russia, UK, France, and India.<sup>57</sup> Chinese and French submarines use low-enriched uranium (LEU), which is not suitable for nuclear weapons.<sup>58</sup> Several nuclear experts have urged the US to reconsider the use of high-enriched uranium (HEU) in the submarines part of AUKUS.<sup>59</sup> The use of HEU is a significant risk as its diversion for use in nuclear weapons may go undetected due to an NPT loophole that allows the use of nuclear fuel for naval propulsion to be exempted from IAEA inspections.<sup>60</sup>

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52. "ASEAN Regional Forum Statement on Reiterating Commitment to Preserve Southeast Asia as a Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone," EEAS, August 5, 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/asean-regional-forum-statement-reiterating-commitment-preserve-southeast-asia-nuclear-weapon\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/asean-regional-forum-statement-reiterating-commitment-preserve-southeast-asia-nuclear-weapon_en).

53. Storey and Choong, "The AUKUS Announcement and Southeast Asia."

54. "IAEA Safeguards in Relation to AUKUS," IAEA, September 9, 2022, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/22/09/govinf2022-20.pdf>.

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56. Romita Chattaraj, "Australia's Nuclear Waste from AUKUS Deal Raises Treaty Violation Concerns," *ASIL*, March 20, 2023, <https://www.asil.org/ILIB/australia%E2%80%99s-nuclear-waste-aukus-deal-raises-treaty-violation-concerns>.

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58. Maria Siow, "AUKUS Nuclear Submarine Loophole for Australia Leads to Proliferation Fears," *South China Morning Post*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3213623/aukus-nuclear-submarine-loophole-australia-leads-proliferation-fears>.

59. Justin Katz, "Former Officials Call for AUKUS Submarines to Use Low Enriched Uranium," *Breaking Defense*, October 6, 2021, <https://breakingdefense.com/2021/10/former-officials-call-for-aukus-australia-submarines-to-use-low-enriched-uranium/>.

60. Sophia Macartney, "Gatekeeping Nuclear-Powered Submarines: What Will the Precedent

Article 1 of the NPT prohibits NWS from transferring nuclear weapons or explosive devices or assisting NNWS in acquiring them “directly or indirectly.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Article 2 prohibits NNWS from acquiring such materials. These Articles come into question as AUKUS involves the transfer of HEU from NWS to NNWS. Furthermore, the IAEA Statute stresses that states cannot use IAEA assistance to further any military purpose.<sup>62</sup>

Likewise, Article 14 of the IAEA comprehensive safeguards agreement states that a state seeking exemption from IAEA safeguards must provide assurances that the nuclear material being used in “non-proscribed military activities” will not be diverted to build nuclear weapons.<sup>63</sup> However, interpretation of the Article is one based on the consensus of other IAEA member states. Moreover, since SSNs cruise in the deep sea for a long time, the IAEA cannot ensure the full tracking and verification information required to establish an effective verification mechanism.

Although India already has an advanced nuclear submarine program, its diaspora in the West and allies have used AUKUS as an opportunity to get a similar deal. An American expert of Indian origin, who is one of their strongest spokespersons on nuclear issues, recently suggested that it will be in American and French interest to extend an INFRUS (India, France, and US) on AUKUS lines.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, Japan proposed JAUKUSI.<sup>65</sup> If the West endorses or agrees to mid-wife acts of proliferation, such as the NSG exemption in 2008 to India, it will create circumstances

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Be?” Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, May 9, 2023, <https://armscontrolcenter.org/gatekeeping-nuclear-powered-submarines-what-will-the-precedent-be/>.

61. UN Department of Disarmament Affairs, “The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” <https://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2005/npttreaty.html>.

62. “The Statute of the IAEA,” International Atomic Energy Agency, n.d., <https://www.iaea.org/about/statute>.

63. “Verification of Nuclear Material in Non-Proscribed Military Use by a State with a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement: Legal and Related Aspects,” February 2022, <https://vcdnp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Para-14-and-safeguards-REV-220215-John-Carlson.pdf>.

64. “Will U.S. Endorse, Midwife INFRUS—India, France Nuclear Compact—In Common Cause To Constrain China?,” StratNews, October 12, 2022, <https://stratnewsglobal.com/defence-security/will-u-s-endorse-midwife-infrus-india-france-nuclear-compact-in-common-cause-to-constrain-china/>.

65. “After Australia, Japan Wants Nuclear Submarines,” Global Defense Corp, September 29, 2021, <https://www.globaldefensecorp.com/2021/09/29/china-worries-japan-wants-nuclear-submarines/>.

for Pakistan to seek similar assistance from any willing partners.

### **Conclusion**

Australia might take a decade to acquire nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS, but the deal has caused significant geopolitical stir. As part of the larger US Indo-Pacific strategy, AUKUS has resonating implications for strategic stability, nuclear risk, and the so-called non-proliferation regime. AUKUS is targeted at China, and it is thus bound to take necessary measures in its self-defense. This will accentuate the classic security dilemma. Since India is a Quad partner of two of the AUKUS states, their interoperability will drag South Asia and Pakistan into this equation. If India also gets an AUKUS-type deal from the West, its naval nuclear capabilities will compel Pakistan to take necessary countermeasures amid economic pressures and a technology denial regime. In sum, AUKUS will negatively impact the security of the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean regions.