AUKUS: an Agreement to make your Friends your Enemies

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Abstract

It is scribbled in the pages of history that many well-disposed efforts such as, making alliances to reverse the rivalries end up failing or even worsening the situations because of the complexity of the trust operation in relationships. This can aptly be identified in the recent Anglo-Saxon alliance, formally known as AUKUS agreement. Ostensibly, AUKUS is a trilateral security agreement among Britain, America and Australia (O'Connor, Cox, & Cooper, 2021). *This trilateral military agreement aimed at augmenting the security in the Indo-Pacific region. America with the help of Britain planned to ensure regional security by providing Australia with Nuclear powered submarines and also aiding in cyber capacities, quantum technologies and artificial intelligence. But it has stronger and deeper messages for the world that need keen attentions. AUKUS agreement aptly illustrates that even the closest of friends can become your enemies when the economic concerns are at stake. This article encompasses around the paradoxical statement that 'an alliance to make your friends your enemies' and also tries to substantiate it with two things. First, being the robust and aggressive reaction to this agreement by France, calling it "stabbing in the back" and second, mixed and perturbed reactions of other states* (Vock, 2021). *This agreement also carries both negative and serious Nuclear Proliferation concerns that also put question mark on the security of the region in future.*

Keywords: *Nuclear-powered submarines, stabbing in the back, NPT, Containment of China, Indo-pacific Region, South China Sea (SCS).*

Introduction:

On 15th of September 2021, America, Britain and Australia have signed a new trilateral agreement aiming at augmenting the regional security by providing Australia with Nuclear-powered submarines and also assisting Australia with Artificial Intelligence (AI), cyber capacities and many other technologies. Apparently, this agreement seems to be a trilateral security maximizer, but this trumpet-blast announcement that Australia will acquire nuclear powered submarines has changed the entire security patterns of the world generally and of the region particularly (Wintour, 2021).

Australia is going to be the seventh country of the world that will acquire nuclear powered submarines. Nuclear powered submarine is a submarine with a propulsion system runs on nuclear power. This entails the transfer of very sensitive nuclear reactor technology. America, due to some complicated set of reasons has only shared such kind of technologies so far with Britain. As opined by the security experts, America under the Biden leadership is trying to contain China in Indo-pacific region with the help of Australia. Now, sharing such sensitive technology with a new country solely and aptly explains that how much America is so focused on the containment of China in the region. The question that deserves to be keenly focused here is that, why does the America need a new alliance since there are already working so many alliances such as QUAD, Five Eyes, ANZAS and NATO etc. in the region? America also has bilateral treaties in the region with for example Japan, South Korea and New Zealand et cetera. In all this mishmash, one more alliance has taken the place in the region. The ultimate rationale behind this agreement rests on the idea that 'whoever controls the sea, controls the world' and how naval power determines the countries' alliance clout and how far a country can exercise naval power with or without his own ships (Shoebridge, 2021).

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In the modern-era, the polarisation of America and China is of greater concern for the world. China, with its neighbouring areas opportunities, claims on Taiwan, maritime territorial claims in South China Sea (SCS) over Japan, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam and all other areas where China has the opportunity to thrive is also the area of vulnerability for China. The first reason why China is so vulnerable in this area is that most of Chinese shipping passes through the Strait of Malacca and that strait can easily be blocked by naval forces of the countries that are hostile to China. This has already made China so paranoid about the QUAD, because India owns the Nicobar Island sand Indian navy being the preeminent in the side of Malacca straits. The second reason why China is so vulnerable in the sea where America is getting hold of, is again a narrow stretch of the sea between China's mainland and Taiwan, known as Taiwan Strait (Zhang, 2022). If the Chinese try to move towards the Taiwan to take it over forcibly or militarily, this is where the friends of Taiwan will come and deter China. The third reason is the area of South China Sea where China has maritime claims with many aforementioned Southeast Asian states including Japan, and America with the help of its allies try to get hold of all the areas where China is vulnerable.

Albeit Australia because of geographic distance has no conflicts with China but it has a trade warfare going on and now Australia as an America ally will be helping in pushing China back. China being the world's second preeminent naval power in the world, with more ships than any other navy in the world, building ships and faster submarines and missile force is a great naval threat to its adversaries. To fill this vacuum in the region as providing counterbalance or riposte to China a new trilateral agreement known as AUKUS has come up.

Stabbing in the back

One of the aggressive and rapid reactions AUKUS faced was from France. Various factors contributed to the aggressiveness of France that led France to call this agreement as ‘stab in the back’. As vehemently opposed the agreement by the former representative of France to the UN and also the former ambassador of France Gérard Araud to America in following words, “The world is a jungle and France has just been reminded this bitter truth by the way the US and UK have stabbed France in the back in Canberra. C’est la vie”. Jeff Lightfoot also reacted to this agreement in a tweet “America has to advance its own interests that is fine. But this is undoubtedly a knife in the back to France on a very important deal for France as it looked to solidify its own complementary role in the Indo-Pacific region” (Experts, 2021). The robust reaction that captured the attention of the critics came from the French Foreign Minister Lean-Yvess Le Drian, who opined this agreement as “stab us in the back” and expressed his disappointment as well as anger by announcing that France recalled its ambassador to US and Australia back. Just to make the record clear, France never recalled it ministers back since there diplomatic relations started. Only once in 1795 during the federalist regime in America, America recalled his minister and declared the treaty of 1778 between France and US null and void.

There are various factors that contributed to this aggression and very strong reaction to the AUKUS agreement by France. The most important was termination of the deal with Australia. France stands to face a huge loss the equivalent to almost $65 billion dollars from a deal to provide Australia with diesel-power conventional submarines. Before signing an agreement with America and US, Australia made a deal with France to have submarines. So, the sudden termination of the deal put France to face a significant economic loss. France being a major weapon exporter, in the cancellation of deal, got furious out of this huge loss. The other reason that disturbed Paris is that, the cancelled deal with Australia, France is standing on the point to lose out strategically in the region where it holds lots of significant interests. Third major reason of this reaction is that France felt that it was left outside of the

strategic cooperation of the allies. Not only France was not included in the talks or the agreement, but also it was not told about the fact that such kind of agreement would be taking place. France out of grievances with US and UK for not being informed also reacted in such a strange and emotional way. Last but not the least, the fact that Immanuel Macron reacted to this is that, because the election is near and in order to gain the strong support in election, this alliance was much needed to secure its footprints in the global security order (Murphy, 2021). Many critics have criticised this response to the agreement as emotional and irrational. Critics criticise this reaction as, not knowing the fact that how states operate, how international relations work and how states protect their own interests. Although France has sent its ambassador back to Washington and Joe Biden also has pacified Macron, but the economic loss out of the termination of the deal, strategic loss of not being the part of alliance have created a vacuum and trust deficit. The ally of the both world wars and in the cold war also is left far behind in current alliance raises the question about the future of the current prevailing blocs. France not being the member of Five Eyes and Quad and now this AUKUS agreement without consulting it gets fearful of the future.

President Macron was not taken into any kind of confidence or consideration about long talks that took place among Australia US and UK. This also infuriated Paris and Paris felt it had every right to feel betrayed because Australia could not handle the situation effectively.

Both America and Australia pertinent to these reactions by France, see things differently. Australia and US claim that French government was not blindsided by the withdrawal of the deal. Prime Minister Scott Morrison shared in an interview that French government by president, minister of foreign affairs and minister of defence was relayed about the cancellation of the deal long ago. He further stated that when in June 2021 he met with The French President at a dinner, he made it very clear about his significant concerns pertinent to security to him. He further said that, during that meeting he made it clear that Australia, due to current strategic environment, would require submarines more efficient than diesel powered submarines. Same was said by Peter Dutton, Australian defence minister in his interview that choosing nuclear powered submarines of US over diesel powered submarines was based on "what serves best for our national security" (SBS News, 2022).Dutton further added that the version of French submarines was not superior to that of what we would acquire from US and UK. Eventually the decision we made was solely based on our own interest of National Security.

US also left no stone unturned to placate France. As secretary of state Antony Blinken said in remarks at the State Department that Paris is still a "vital partner" of US in Indo-pacific region particularly and around the world generally. He further added "I want to make it crystal clear that there is no regional or any kind of divide that separates the interests of our Pacific or Atlantic partners". He says in an interview that US welcomes European states in playing important roles in the Indo-pacific and France is, in particular, an important partner on this and on many other issues terracing back generations and we will leave no opportunity to further augment our trans-Atlantic cooperation in the world.

Indo-Pacific Nations and AUKUS

The central hypothesis of this article entails that how AUKUS agreement turning, once friends into enemies and making enemies more aggressive than they were before. Pertinent to this hypothesis, Indo-Pacific Nations' mixed reactions to this agreement add a lot in it. China, being the major power in Indo-Pacific, holds a significant importance as a reactionary nation to this agreement (Pant & Kamath, 2021).

China, since the very day of 15th September, when this agreement was made on air, vehemently accused it and shared its concerns about the agreement. Zhao Lijian, the

spokesperson of foreign affairs department of People Republic of China said, "the nuclear-powered submarines agreement made among US, Australia and UK has seriously impacted and undermined

- Regional peace and stability
- Exacerbated the arms race
- And seriously damaged international non-proliferation efforts in the region.

He further added that "these three countries should have discarded the ill Cold War mentality, based on Zero-sum game and narrower geopolitical approach in modern time". He further threatened the three states that they will face the music of such irresponsible attitude severely. Another Spokesperson of Chinese Government Hua Chunying, said in an interview that "China is totally opposed to this heinous exploitation of the existing loopholes in the IAEA and NPT safeguards mechanisms, made by US, UK and Australia in the region (Huisken, 2022).

Another robust reaction to this agreement was given by a tabloid the Global Times, owned by Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Chinese Communist Party is notorious for being more threatening and aggressive than that of the official government. In statements, it clearly denounced Australia after this agreement and made it clear to the world that "by now, Australia should consider itself as an adversary of China and there is no ambiguity in it" and also threatened Australia that "it could be now targeted severely by the China as other nations were targeted, if it violated any law with bravado alliance with US or by being military aggressive. It further made it clear to Australia that "avoids any kind of provocation and aggression otherwise China will react to it with showing no mercy at all" (Embassy Highlights, 2022). And he concluded by saying "it seems obvious that Australian soldiers are likely to be the first ones destroying their lives in South China Sea (SCS) or in Indo-Pacific Region. Such kind of aggressive statements make it clear that China has not accepted the agreement as it can be predicted. In addition to not accepting it, China has clearly shown that it would be more aggressive in Indo-Pacific region as well as in South China Sea. There is no denying the fact that, within one month since the agreement was made, China started deploying more military troops and ships in South China Sea just to prepare for any kind of upheaval in the region. Reports say that, China since the first of day its conflict with other Southeast Asian states was never seen this much aggressive than it has become now. This clearly entails the story that AUKUS agreement has brought lots of negative repercussions with it in the region.

Another CCP official, Vice President of Beijing based Think Tank known as Centre for China and Globalisation and former interpreter for former leader of China Deng Xiaoping, Victor Gao defined this agreement to be the violation

- International law
- NPT and other agreements such as CTBT and START.

And he warned that Australia's moves under this agreement towards nuclear powered submarines will likely lead Australia to be targeted with nuclear weapons in a future war (Jiangtao, 2021).

Malaysia, Indonesia and AUKUS

Both states on equal footings, share the fear that this agreement will bring with it an arms race in the region, and more likely to heighten the risks of conflicts. The Prime Minister of Malaysia, Ismael Sabri Yaakub said that "this agreement would provoke other nations to take aggressive actions in the region" especially in South China Sea. The Indonesian government also shared its fears and said that it did view the agreement very "deeply" and "cautiously" concerning to the continuing power projection and arms race in the particular region (Murphy, 2021) This clearly indicates that both Malaysia and Indonesia are reluctant to accept this agreement whole heartedly because of its long-term repercussions in the form of arms race, nuclear proliferation and deteriorating security issues in the region. In short,

except for Taiwan and Philippines, no other state has openly and wholeheartedly accepted this agreement. This clearly entails that how the AUKUS is being perceived by the world in general and by Indo-pacific region particular. This has become a great challenge to the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. Except for Philippines no state in Southeast Asia accepted the agreement that can actually lead to arms race wholeheartedly. This can clearly be seen in the reactions of all the major states of the region. During the regime of Mahatir Mohammad, Malaysia also shared its fears of arms race in the region on various occasion. Same goes with the Singapore, that it also cannot afford to have arms race in the region.

Southeast Asia dynamics and AUKUS

As clearly opined by the savant Sebastian Strangio the Southeast Asian Editor of The Diplomat, that there are unequivocal fears among most of the Southeast Asian states pertinent to AUKUS agreement. States fear that this agreement will make the region as a hub or frontline for the near future conflict between US and China. This will definitely have grave repercussions for the surrounding states. He goes on to further explain that why there are fears among the southeast Asian states that "at a very root level the perceptions of America and southeast Asian states diverge at the very point of what exactly is the threat China poses. Albeit the region has great fear of China being the future hegemon, the region does not have enough appetite either for competitive role of US with China in the region. So, the states of Southeast Asia region are reluctant to step into one side while making other side insecure and threatening.

North Korean reaction to this agreement is also as it can be expected. Foreign Ministry Official condemned the deal by saying that it would disturb the strategic equilibrium in the Asia-pacific region (BBC News, 2021). He further expressed his opinion that this is extremely dangerous and undesirable act by responsible and mature nations and it will definitely trigger off an unending chain of nuclear race and that is undesirable for mankind as a whole. It can be deduced while generalising the reaction of the region, that AUKUS is not warmly welcomed by the region rather questioned. The remarks of North Korea came just after one week when it tested two more nuclear weapons that of long-range cruise missile and a long-range ballistic missile. Though it is not directly relevant to AUKUS, but it can be symbolised as an expecting nuclear arms race resulted by AUKUS deal.

European Union and AUKUS

Ursula Von Der Leyen told CNN in an interview that one of our members has been treated in a way that is irresponsible and not acceptable and we want to know that why and what happened (Marafona, 2022). EU not only stayed there but also demanded an apology from Australia for withdrawing from the deal without telling France and also denounced lack of loyalty and transparency on the behalf of America. EU further made it evident to the member states of the agreement that this has impacted the entire union. A Trade and Technology Council summit got postponed after the agreement. As a reaction to this, France also cancelled the free trade talks which were scheduled in the month of September. Most of the states showed their interests in the agreement with reference to providing counterbalance to China and Russia in Indo-pacific by pacifying France. But EU as a whole also shared its reluctance to accept it. France being the very important part of the EU cannot be left alone when it comes to the interest of European Union. Just like other states, EU also shared its reluctance to accept AUKUS agreement.

NPT and AUKUS:

Under this agreement US is supposed to send almost 12 nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, which it has never shared with anyone before except UK in 1958 under the agreement known as US-UK Mutual Defence agreement(ACTON, 2021). Now America is going to share nuclear propulsion in the form of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia and this has actually got the attention of security strategists pertinent to nuclear technology. Nevertheless, under the pact to share highly enriched uranium to Australia has been described as Nuclear Proliferation by critics Scholars and politicians as well. As criticised vehemently by Sebastine Phillippe, a renowned strategist as "now we will unequivocally see the proliferation of highly sensitive and lethargic technology in the coming a few years and the world does not have the potential to deter it otherwise". Another security strategist criticises this agreement in the following words "the implications related to non-proliferation in this AUKUS agreement are both serious and negative" (Acton, 2021). He further adds that "I am not really sure whether Australia will misuse this material itself or not, but I am concerned that this material will damage the security pattern and also proliferate the further destructive elements in the world". After Brazil, Australia is going to be the second country to acquire nuclear powered submarines without having nuclear weapons. Real issues arise, that because of this step, other countries will also get motivated to increase their security in terms of nuclear weapons. It will motivate other countries to acquire highly enriched uranium though with different objectives. Iran, after this agreement considers itself eligible to acquire more uranium for defence purposes. Likewise, many states will yearn to maximise their security powers as a domino effect.

Conclusion

As opined by many analysts and strategists that "who holds the water, controls the world". America, with same strategy has come into the Indo-pacific region for the containment of China. This time, US has come to the stage with one passive and a different state. Australia, as previously was not in any kind of grave conflict without some skirmishes, has now clearly been the ally of US to stop China by acquiring nuclear powered submarines. By acquiring Nuclear powered submarines, Australia will become a very important navy partner of America and by this, China will become more vulnerable and as a reaction to this, more aggressive as well. Whether war is followed by peace or peace is followed by war, is a topic that has long been in a debate over the past a few decades. Contemporary world has witnessed many alliances that were aimed at burying the hatchets, but ended up augmenting the fears and exacerbating the environment. A very keen analysis, taking into consideration that how the states responded to AUKUS agreement, clearly entails a likewise story that how alliances actually disturb the existing balance and peace. France has previously been an ally of America and now being so furious about this agreement expresses that this trilateral security pact has disturbed the peace at greater level. Not only this agreement has increased the fears of the friends and caused trust-deficit among the past friends but also has made the enemies more dangerous. Such as, after this agreement China has become so aggressive and has continuously been enriching its holds in the Indo pacific region. Likewise, India has also shared its reluctance to accepting it wholeheartedly because QUAD seems to be of no use in the future.

One can deduce from aforementioned facts and arguments given by some strategists, that AUKUS will leave very serious and negative imprints on the face of the globe in modern world. It will not only make past friends, enemies but also make past- enemies more aggressive in future.

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