



## AUKUS and Asia Pacific's Instability

Through the infamous AUKUS deal, Australia will be the first non-nuclear weapon state (NNWS) to purchase nuclear submarines from the US and UK. While raising questions about the prospects of transformation in the decades-old regional balance of power, the expected deal has sparked an intense discussion over the viability and legitimacy of the nuclear nonproliferation regime.

Even though the highly enriched uranium fuel in submarines may be sealed for the vessel's lifetime, it does not rule out the possibility of Canberra diverting it for making weapons. This fuel may be under IAEA safeguards but how will the watchdog be able to sniff if it's being cheated? The US and UK are IAEA's largest funders and those who fund become the judge, the jury, and the executioner in playing down the nuclear weapons proliferation risk the deal poses. The US and UK argue that it will not pose a threat due to Australia's unwavering commitment to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) but China, Russia, and many other states are of the view that this commitment is unverifiable.

China's views are that "Firstly, it violates the NPT [which] is the cornerstone of the international nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime, and an important component of the post-war international security system. The relevant NPT provisions clearly stipulate the non-proliferation obligations of nuclear-weapon states (NWS) and NNWS, as well as the definition and legal basis of nuclear proliferation. Relevant cooperation apparently violates the purpose and objectives of the NPT and seriously undermines the international nuclear non-proliferation regime, of which the NPT is the cornerstone. Since AUKUS officially announced the decision on nuclear submarine cooperation in September 2021, they have not yet notified the IAEA of any substantive information on the cooperation. But at the same time, the leaders of AUKUS have repeatedly and publicly declared that the cooperation is progressing smoothly. This indicates that AUKUS have deliberately concealed information on the transfer of nuclear weapons materials while advancing relevant cooperation."<sup>1</sup>

It is not tricky to predict the consequences of such a deal, given a complex and uncertain geopolitical environment. The establishment of AUKUS ignores the fact that

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<sup>1</sup> Chinese Embassy Spokesperson's Remarks on AUKUS Nuclear Submarine Cooperation, 20 September 2022, [http://au.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sghdxwfb\\_1/202209/t20220920\\_10768601.htm](http://au.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sghdxwfb_1/202209/t20220920_10768601.htm).

it will vitiate strategic instability in the Asia Pacific region. After being jilted by Australia for canceling a USD 90 billion-plus deal, France has decided to make money at the cost of the Indian Ocean region's stability and offered India its nuclear submarine technology.<sup>2</sup> Russia has already proliferated this technology to India. It is easy to guess what China will do to maintain regional stability.

AUKUS is a blow to NPT, which has already been on the ventilator after the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) granted an exceptional trade waiver to India in 2008. Likewise, NPT NWS' reluctance to fulfill their disarmament obligation will add to its vulnerabilities. NPT's Article 3 has a loophole that exempts naval reactors from nuclear safeguards<sup>3</sup> and AUKUS proliferators have utilized it. Russia and China do not agree with this false interpretation; the former, however, has proliferated nuclear submarine technology to India.

AUKUS is also a violation of NPT Articles I, II, and IV, which prohibit such a transfer. Claiming nuclear submarines as non-military weapons undermines nuclear non-proliferation protocols because the problem is not the submarine but highly enriched uranium that can be used for military purposes. Also, what will be the means to verify whether so-called UK and US supplied SSNs carry nuclear weapons?

Misunderstandings and oversights are additional challenges. The adversary can confuse dual use platforms like these subs carrying non-strategic weapons and cannot ascertain whether nuclear weapons are on board or not. The situation can lead to miscalculated preemptive strikes in a crisis situation.

For a few pennies and to contain China's rise, AUKUS is creating a problem and vitiating it. The three Axis powers will be responsible for the arms race in the region and the risk of war it will create. AUKUS will have an impact on other security-conscious countries in the Asia Pacific, particularly the two US allies, South Korea, and Japan. In August 2020, South Korea declared its intent to construct a nuclear submarine and its PM recently expressed similar interests, only to issue clarification under "some pressure."

Similarly, the recent increase in Japan's defense budget, which reflects Tokyo's assessment of threat in the South Pacific Ocean, is a crucial indicator of the former's plan for future military modernization. If South Korea purchases a nuclear submarine, Japan will be placed in the awkward diplomatic position of being the only significant actor in the region without one.

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<sup>2</sup> After AUKUS, in yet another jolt for China, France offers India deal to make 6 nuclear submarines, 13 March 2023, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/after-aukus-in-yet-another-jolt-for-china-france-offers-india-deal-to-make-6-nuclear-submarines-12302902.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Limiting the nuclear-proliferation blowback from the AUKUS submarine deal, The Strategist, 21 September 2012, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/limiting-the-nuclear-proliferation-blowback-from-the-aukus-submarine-deal/>.

Lastly, as mentioned above, South Asia will be adversely affected by this deal, considering the increasing bonhomie between the US-led West and India and the resulting military asymmetries in the region. Russia has been leasing nuclear submarines to India since the 1980s and has helped the latter in building its nuclear attack and ballistic missile submarines fleet. The recently expressed French and British intent for a similar deal to India shall create a bigger Frankenstein's monster for Pakistan and force it to address its security dilemma. If India and Australia can be exceptions to the so-called non-proliferation rules and norms, spring would not be far away for Pakistan.

In sum, AUKUS is another beginning of the well-trodden path of strategic instability. Perhaps, the exceptionalism that is about to be created in the rules-based order will be regretted.

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