
AUKUS and the Great Power Rivalry

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Abstract

The world is in the midst of another great power rivalry i.e., the U.S.-China rivalry. The United States relied on an alliance system to win the Cold War and thereafter has continued forming new alliances and partnerships. The latest of those is the AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States). This paper discusses what AUKUS is in addition to describing its legal ramifications. The paper will also examine the relevance of AUKUS and analyze the U.S-China military power in the western Pacific along with its impact on East Asia.

Keywords

Great Power Rivalry, Non-Proliferation, Nuclear Weapons, Sea-Power, Nuclear Submarines

The ICS is an interdisciplinary research institution, which has a leadership role in the promotion of Chinese and East Asian Studies in India. The ICS Analysis aims to encourage debate and provide informed and balanced inputs for policy formulation and is based on extensive research and interactions with a wide community of scholars, experts, diplomats and military personnel in India and abroad.

Introduction

Historically, alliances have been a crucial part of great power rivalries. Alliances can be traced back to the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, where Sparta led the Peloponnesian league and Athens led the Delian league (Roskam, 1985). Alliances have played a crucial part in modern rivalries, prominently during the Cold war. During the Cold War, the United States led the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Alliance) and the Soviet Union led the Warsaw Pact. The formation of NATO in 1949 marked the dawn of a security struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union as Stalin violated the Yalta Agreements in Eastern Europe (Toth, 2019). Stalin consolidated power in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria as opposed to holding elections. Much like the Soviet Union China has also been violating international law in South China Sea and consolidating power in the first island chain by building artificial islands (MASTRO, 2021). China's actions necessitates the formation of a security alliance in the Indo-Pacific to check its actions much like the actions of Soviet Union necessitated the formation of NATO.

The new cold war will have one similar variable with its predecessor i.e., the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism.

The United States' foreign policy post the second World War has greatly focused on alliances (Lindsay, 2003). The Cold War was defined and won due to military alliances such as NATO along with economic and technological cooperation between the western countries. The world is on the verge of a second Cold War or maybe it is already in one (Abrams, 2022). Albeit the Cold War was defined as a competition between communism and socialism versus democracy and capitalism, the new cold war will have one similar variable with its predecessor i.e., the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. The United States this time too is banking on alliances and AUKUS is one of them.

In two decades since the starting of the 21st century, the Chinese navy has more than tripled in size. It has gone from having 110 battle force ships in 2000 to having 360 ships by the end of 2020 (CRS, 2021). People's Republic of China's (PRC) aggressive shipbuilding since 2012 has been due to the great power competition with the United States in a quest to dominate the western Pacific region. China's naval modernization has been brought forth by its rapidly developing economy and increasing footprint outside Asia. According to the Department of Defense, USA, China will have developed significant naval capabilities by 2035, especially in submarine (DoD, 2021).

AUKUS is a step-in deterring China's naval capability and stop it from projecting power outside the first island chain.

The United States and China have been in an overt great power competition since at least 2018 when President Trump initiated the Trade war and both countries-imposed counter-sanctions (Kolb, 2021). The rivalry has worsened since the Covid 19 pandemic with the United States sanctioning officials in Xinjiang (Wintour, 2021) and PRC's regular incursions into Taiwanese airspace with bombers and fighter jets.

What is AUKUS?

The United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia on 15 September 2021 announced a trilateral security pact in a joint statement (House, 2021). The primary aim of the pact is to modernize the Australian navy by giving access to cutting-edge military technology to Australia including artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and undersea capabilities. The pact further provides eight nuclear-powered and conventionally armed submarines (WhiteHouse, 2021).

AUKUS: Treaty of Rarotonga and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons

China's initial response to the announcement of AUKUS was that the pact was "extremely irresponsible, undermined regional peace and

stability," and 'violated the 1985 Treaty of Rarotonga' (Foreign Ministry, 2021). The 'Treaty of Rarotonga' states that the signatory states wouldn't use nuclear explosive device of any kind. The treaty also puts restrictions on nuclear testing (Alexander, 2021). Under the current agreement, AUKUS does not violate the Rarotonga Treaty given that Nuclear-powered submarines are considered a control use of nuclear energy and do not fit the definition of a nuclear device (Nuclear, 2021).

The same principle applies to the NPT (Office of Disarmament Affairs, 1995), but it sets a dangerous precedent as this can be used by countries such as Iran. In the grand scheme of things if Iran decides to buy nuclear submarines from China, China might sell them to create a balance of power in West Asia. Iran has already threatened to enrich very high levels of Uranium for a future submarine program (Paton, 2018). Looking at New Zealand's historical apprehension over nuclear weapons they are not expected to favor the deal.

Relevance of AUKUS in deterrence against China

1. The submarines will take a long time to get built and will be expensive and difficult to operate (Clarke, 2021). This long delivery timeline will limit the usefulness of the submarines. Australia can in the meanwhile lease British or American submarines to train and learn to operate the submarines.

2. Taiwan: The United States former undersecretary of Defense Michele Flournoy commented in 2018 that the best way to deter China from invading Taiwan is to have the ability to sink China's navy in 72 hours (Zhen, 2020). Australia has fought side by side with the United States in every major war since the 20th century including World War I, World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam War, Iraq War, and the Afghan War (Henry, 2020).

China in the past year has regularly violated Taiwanese airspace by sending its bombers and fighter jets (BBC, 2021). With the increasing competition between China and the United States, President Biden said that "the United States would defend Taiwan if China invaded" (Ruwitch, 2021). Albeit, the United States has maintained a strategic ambiguity when it comes to defending Taiwan, the present scenario calls for defending Taiwan by boots on the ground because if China invades and occupies Taiwan without the United States doing anything, it might incentivize China to forcefully take Senkaku Islands and assert dominance in the First Island Chain including the South China Sea.

If the United States pledges to defend Taiwan with actual force, sea power will play a significant part in it and Australia's inclusion will act as a force multiplier for the United States.

4. AUKUS seems to have a dual role. The goal is to maintain the decreasing power gap between China and the United States.

The United States has a numerical advantage over China in terms of aircraft carriers and Submarines, but the United States has a blue-water navy divided into commands and China's naval capabilities are largely focused on East Asia with 255 coastal patrol ships acting as force multipliers, China has gained a clear strategic advantage over the United States in the Western Pacific.

The United States currently has 297 naval vessels as compared to China's 360 (CRS, 2021), and that gap is projected to grow further as the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is predicted to field 400 vessels by 2025 as opposed to 355 vessels by the United States (Mainardi, 2021).

The United States Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) consists of approximately 175 vessels. China's rapid naval modernization has virtually ended the United States' naval supremacy in East Asia (Service, 2022). In this scenario, an Australian navy equipped with SSN would affect the China/US balance of naval forces in East Asia. The Australian Navy currently operates Collins-class diesel-electric submarines which are incapable of long-term deployment as they must surface now and then as compared to Nuclear powered submarines

that can operate for long periods of time underwater.

Given China's increasingly assertive actions in the South China Sea such as the huge Chinese fishing ships crewed by PRC's maritime militia encroached Philippines's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (BBC, 2021). To counter the Chinese Navy in the Western Pacific the Australian SSNs may be used to determine PRC's anti-submarine warfare technologies. As SSNs are quieter than diesel or electric submarines, they will prove to be vital in the competition against China. SSNs are quicker than conventional submarines so they'll also have an escort function on long deployments with warships. This will give Australia the capability of long-term deployment and will act as a force multiplier for the United States. AUKUS also seems to be done with an eye on the future with the China-US naval gap to increase significantly by the 2030s, the Australian naval capabilities will reduce the power gap between the two.

U.S.-China naval capabilities

The United States started the 21st century with a significant power gap with China in terms of naval capabilities. China quickly reduced that gap and overtook the United States in terms of gross vessels in 2020. The United States currently has 297 naval vessels as compared to China's 360 (CRS, 2021), and that gap is projected to grow further as the People's

Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is predicted to field 400 vessels by 2025 as opposed to 355 vessels by the United States (Mainardi, 2021).

The Chinese fleet consists of two aircraft carriers, one cruiser, 32 destroyers, 49 frigates, 37 corvettes, and 86 missile-armed coastal patrol ships. In terms of Submersible Ships (SS), it has 46 diesel-powered attack submarines, six nuclear-powered (with the capability to produce one SSN a year), and four ballistic missile submarines (DOD, 2021). The United States on the other hand has 11 aircraft carriers, 92 cruisers and destroyers, and 59 small surface combatants and combat logistics ships. In terms of SS, it has 50 attack submarines, 14 ballistic missile submarines, and four cruise missile submarines (CSIS, 2020).

Has U.S. lost military supremacy in the Western Pacific?

The United States has enjoyed unimpeded naval supremacy in the Western Pacific since the end of the Second World War. But the PLAN has been developing capabilities that have allowed it to operate in far seas for a longer period of time. According to a PLA Daily article "Chinese destroyers that retired in 2016 spent an annual average of 30 days at sea, traveling an average of 6,000 nautical miles (nm) over that period. China's newest destroyers average more than 200 days at sea, logging 30,000 nm" (Blog, 2019). Looking at Chinese and American economic, technological, and military

capabilities two assertions can be made vis-à-vis the military supremacy in the Western Pacific.

1. The power gap between the two countries has shrunk over the years China has quickly caught up to the United States. China has made significant gains vis-à-vis the United States in national Power which in turn converts to military power (Casetti, 2008). China has been making quick gains in components of national power. It is among the fastest growing economies since 2000 (Statista, 2020), China has a monopoly over the production of 17 major rare earth metals (Print, 2021). China's Industrial Capacity utilisation was one of the highest in the world averaging 74.99 between 2013-2017 and peaking at 78.4 in the second quarter of 2021 (Economics, 2021).

China's 2019 defense white paper states that "China continues to enjoy political stability, ethnic unity, and social stability. Its comprehensive national power, international influence, and ability to withstand risk have all notably increased" (PLA, 2019). According to Xi Jinping statement at the 19th CPC National Congress in October 2017, the PLA will achieve full modernization and by 2050 it will turn into a world class force (Xi 2017). China is stated to surpass the United States' economy by 2030 (Tolliday, 2022) and that will certainly lead to enhanced Chinese capacities in technology and military.

2. Chinese military inferiority vis-à-vis the U.S. increases as it operates far from the mainland. Within China, there are different perceptions of China's near sea and far sea capabilities. Chinese Scholar Zhu Feng states that "the United States is still the dominant sea and air power in the Asia-pacific region," but in coastal waters, the PLA has "significant 'anti-access/area denial' combat capabilities" and might be able to present a more potent challenge to the United States (Zhu 2018). While Hu Bo, of Beijing University notes that "the U.S military will continue to enjoy hegemony in maritime domains outside the first island chain" over the next ten to twenty years, China will "gain the advantage within the first island chain and in nearby waters (Hu 2014)

Hu Bo is right in his assertion as China has overtaken the United States in the gross number of naval vassals which gives it the dominance over the United States at least in the near seas as they have multiple bases in the East coast of China and in the South China Sea. PLAN capabilities are further supplemented by Dong-Feng 26 due to its ability to launch from unprepared positions (Wang 2015). However, the PLAN still has a long way to go before challenging the United States in the far seas. It needs a formidable submarine fleet to be able to challenge the United States beyond the first island chain. PLAN's Shang-class SSNs have the capacity to challenge the United States' Los Angeles-class attack submarines built during the

1970s to 1990s but they are still inferior to the newer Virginia class (Sutton, 2020).

Impact of AUKUS on the future of security in East Asia

China is currently in maritime or territorial disputes with USA's treaty allies in the Western Pacific. It is embroiled with Japan in the Senkaku islands, its relationship with South Korea is deteriorating due to North Korea and it has regularly threatened the Philippines over the South China Sea. The United States remains the primary source of security for Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. But they are in no way helpless without the United States. Japan currently has 51 major surface combatants (Chang, 2020), South Korea has 23 warships (Military, 2021). However, the United States' security umbrella is needed more than ever in East Asia.

The China commission report of 2021 stated that "the PRC's strategy aims to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation by 2049 to match or surpass U.S. global influence and power, displace U.S. alliances and security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific." (DoD, 2021) Dominating East Asia is the first step in PRC's scheme to surpass the United States. The inclusion of Australia in the security architecture of East Asia serves as a boost in the arms of the US and its East Asian allies.

Conclusion

The United States had untamed hegemony in the Western Pacific post the Cold War, but the rise of China has brought forth a thorn in the United States way. The United States and China are currently embroiled in a great power competition, and this has brought forth an uncertain world. The United States banked on the power of security and economic allies during the Cold war and this time too it is following the same. The United States is currently engaged in collecting allies and groupings. AUKUS is the latest alliance in the long list of US alliances and security partnerships. The US is already a member of the Quad grouping consisting of India, Japan, and Australia. While the Quad grouping is largely focused on emerging technologies, trade, supply chains, and climate change to counter China, AUKUS is an explicit military alliance.

Although China has developed capabilities to counter the United States in the near seas, they still lack the capability to counter the United States in far seas. However, with rapid modernization and technological and economic progress, China is slated to reduce that gap in the next 20 years. The United States seems to have realized that the AUKUS can be termed as an alliance with its eyes on the future. This also makes sense of the long timeline in delivering the nuclear subs to Australia. The AUKUS can be termed as an alliance of the future.

The future of the East Asian landscape is uncertain and dangerous with an ever assertive and revisionist China looking to make unilateral changes. China is repeatedly modernizing and increasing its military and is slated to become the world's largest economy by the middle of the century. By the time China surpasses the United States in economic terms, it'll also look to create a power gap between the two. With AUKUS and security alliances in East Asia, the United States is looking to maintain a Balance of Power in East Asia.

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