

AUKUS, Geo-Political Risks and India's Minilateral Calculus

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Multilateralism has been a critical establishment of the post war rules-based global order which revolves around international organisations—that promote universal participation—like the United Nations (UN). In any case, these associations have become less and less successful throughout the long term. The multilateral framework has been late in adjusting to the world's changing power structures, and to create associations, rules and standards for worldwide –and especially regional --problems.¹ In this context, “Minilateralism” is the new and preferred tool of cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. It alludes to the arrangement of smaller, more regional interests specific formal (or at times informal groupings of nations to resolve explicit issues, and try not to get stalled by interminable multilateral exchanges that take longer. Examples of minilaterals are many; Quad, various trilaterals that have emerged such as India-Japan-Australia and even region-specific ventures focused on promoting broader economic multilateralism such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). These instances of minilateralism have included mainly the US and its partners, and are intended to adjust (or even contain) China.

AUKUS is the most recent such minilateral, this time with the participation of US, UK and Australia. President Joe Biden appears glad to have a positive venture, following rapidly behind the lamentable US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, one of the critical powers behind Brexit, has welcomed AUKUS amidst his eagerness to advance a “Global Britain”, while Prime Minister Scott Morrison is frantic to enter a ‘forever partnership’² when Australia’s relations with China have been at an ‘all-time low’.³ Amidst such motives, a large part of the focus on AUKUS has covered its first focus of getting atomic-power submarines (yet

without atomic weapons) for the Royal Australian Navy, and the sudden and rather brutal withdrawal of an Australian arrangement with France for building conventional submarines angering Paris and raising to question trust in the US yet again in Brussels.⁴

However, as amply evident by its Joint Leaders Statement, AUKUS vows to be more;⁵ it can stretch out collaboration to deep data and technological sharing, further combination of defence and security related science, innovation, industrial growth and supply chains, improving digital connectivity, artificial intelligence, quantum advancements and extra undersea capacities. This focus on cutting-edge technologies in the defense sphere situates AUKUS at the center of the fourth industrial revolution, which is currently transforming human lives and human behavior in entirely new and unanticipated ways by integrating cyber and physical systems.⁶ Here, the fourth industrial revolution is characterized as a fusion of “physical, digital and biological worlds, impacting all disciplines, economies and industries”.⁷ Keeping in mind the broader opportunities AUKUS brings, what role could the partnership hold in India’s geopolitical nexus and future in the Indo-Pacific?

India’s Minilateralism and AUKUS

India as part of the Indo-Pacific regional order is very actively responding to the rise of an assertive China through developing innovative minilateral initiatives; beyond the Quad, trilaterals such as India-Japan-Australia, India-US-Japan, India-France-Australia, India-Japan-Italy, and more have driven New Delhi’s diplomatic outreach in the region.

While the word ‘China’ was not referenced in the Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS,⁸ this partnership is very obviously coming as a reaction to the debased security climate in the Indo-Pacific incited by China’s aggressive ascent and its contention with the US. Such a narrative becomes clearer upon realisation that AUKUS, ultimately, is additionally a thinned down adaptation of the Five Eyes, the world’s key intelligence collusion alliance.⁹ AUKUS does not resolve or seek to answer major questions like foreign policy driven interference, ranges of prominence via economic coercion, financial pressure and human rights which are relevant to the great power competition between China and the US and its allies. Be that as it may, India

recognizes that it will improve the Indo-Pacific regions military and tech capacities, regardless of whether the conceived eight submarines require numerous years to fabricate.

In addition, AUKUS will be commonly gainful in that the militarily overstretched US needs its partners to assume a greater part in the region; this remains a major factor behind India and powers like Japan welcoming the initiative even as they were somewhat left out of the negotiation process. At the same time, Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla has clarified that the trilateral security alliance would have little relevance and limited impact on the functioning of the Quad,¹⁰ therein also showing that AUKUS is not necessarily viewed as a negative development. If anything, AUKUS comes as a defense-focused Anglosphere initiative to complement the Quad, particularly in the Quad's emphasis on critical and emerging technologies.¹¹ The Quad working group in this domain covers a broad range of issues, including global standard setting on design, development, and use; monitoring trends and opportunities; telecommunication equipment cooperation; and supply chains.¹²

Hence, India's acceptance of AUKUS stems largely from the fact that it does not view the same to be an impediment to its own mini-lateralism nexus. Rather, it allows for and is evidence of greater US commitment to the region, especially as the US-China technology rivalry continues. Further, and more importantly, the establishment of AUKUS creates more room for India to build on its own technological partnership with Global and Strategic partner US with a focus on military technology.¹³ Both India and the US have institutionalized within their foreign policies a strong defense partnership; this is evidenced in the conclusion of their four foundational agreements: the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) for geospatial intelligence signed in October 2020; the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) signed in 2019; the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) concluded in 2018; and the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016.¹⁴ As the China threat has intensified, New Delhi and Washington have found increasing alignment in their strategic thinking and realized the importance of the other in their China, and wider Indo-Pacific, outlooks. Accordingly, a key priority in India-US security ties moving forward will be supporting cooperation and collaboration for the co-development of advanced

technologies,¹⁵ and AUKUS comes as an indication that the US will be more open to such an imperative.

India's position on AUKUS has up to this point been cautious, with New Delhi being aware of the fine equilibrium it must maintain between its emergence as a critical security partner of the Indo-Pacific powers and its increasingly strong partnership with European powers (especially France). In this context, AUKUS has birthed international strategy challenges for India in both the Europe-Asia and Indo-Pacific space. The changing geopolitical and geostrategic environment has only urged New Delhi not to dispose of any power association but instead stay active in engaging with provincial partners to focus on India's national interest. As such, for India, AUKUS sets out a freedom to remain connected, envision and make progress towards more profound, more extensive organizations with the European Union (EU) especially when NATO has seen debilitating transoceanic ties with Washington.¹⁶ Yet, ultimately, AUKUS highlights the evolving American "strategic reorientation" towards the Indo-Pacific, and India is without a doubt benefitting as non-alliance recipient of this changing viewpoint as a security partner of the US.¹⁷

India's geo-political risks and AUKUS in its military nexus

While concerns have abounded in Indian strategic and media circles that the Anglo-centric AUKUS alliance could take over the Quad in Washington's own Indo-Pacific outlook, especially as Australia has shown readiness to assume the job of the US's military mediator in the locale — an American army installation on Australian soil to maintain the submarines is now unavoidable. Still, keeping the spirit of minilateralism alive with a focus on military and defence, New Delhi sees potential to access cooperation via the Quad framework with AUKUS. With the US and Australia being a part of both, and India-UK ties growing, it provides complementarities for AUKUS powers to build with the Quad. In areas such as tech collaboration, this holds especially true as critical technologies, areas like space, cyber and communications have become of primary focus in regional conflicts.¹⁸ Here, India can look for opportunities for increased exchanges with AUKUS, and perhaps even critical technology transfers, for greater region-wide cooperation to address shared threats – like those in the digital space.

India's China Challenge

India's China challenge is only becoming a more pressing and urgent. While China has always been a source of concern in India's national security thinking since 1962, both states had developed an admittedly uneasy "developmental partnership". However, in recent years, China's pursuit of its national rejuvenation ambition has resulted in rather belligerent tactics and behavior that are aimed at consolidating the Chinese power in the region. Chinese incursions into Indian territory during the Galwan Valley clash between the two states in June 2020 at their disputed border along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), which saw casualties on both sides, has been an indication of the threat China poses to India's sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹⁹ Not only has it severely deteriorated trust between them, but also acted as proof that as it enters into a competition for global (and regional) primacy with Washington, Beijing remains determined to obstruct India's rise as a major global power and its growing agency in the region and beyond.

Such a perception of the China challenge has made it imperative for India to explore increasing minilateral and multilateral partnerships as a way of strengthening its power posture in the region. In this context, although it does not include or factor India, AUKUS could present an additional pathway for engagement to enhance and further India's national security interests. Over and above China's territorial threat at the LAC, India is also deeply concerned by the maritime and technological challenge that the economic giant poses. India's participation in the Quad, as well as its outreach under its flagship Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) proposed/established by Prime Minister Modi in 2019, is aimed at building alliances that bolster India's maritime security.²⁰ Additional measures to this effect include joint naval exercises – like the Malabar exercises between the Quad member nations – and heavy investment in upgrading and building state-of-the-art naval equipment.²¹ Now, critical technologies are quickly assuming center stage in not just the US-China rivalry, but also the India-China dynamics. In many ways, conventional warfare is gradually taking a backburner as conflicts between states for geopolitical dominance become increasingly defined by their critical technological capabilities.

India remains a major player in the global technological ecosystem; high quality human resources, lower costs of labour, and increasing governmental support for technological innovation has poised India – the world's most populous country – for the fourth industrial

revolution.²² India's prospering start-up and innovation culture is amply evident by the rapid change in the country's Global Innovation Index (GII) ranking, from 81 in 2015 to 46 in 2021.²³ Moreover, the GII 2021 places India second amongst lower-middle income group of economies and first among Central and South Asian economies.²⁴ Although its digital infrastructure to support such growth remains comparatively weak, India boasts of a sophisticated market, high knowledge and technological outputs, a strong science and engineering workforce, information communication technology (ICT) services exports – among others – which make it ripe for reinvention as a technology and innovation leader. Government initiatives like “Make in India” (revitalized by the Atmanirbhar Bharat, or self-reliant India, program), “Digital India”²⁵ and “Startup India”²⁶ aim to foster such a future; this digital vision was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic amidst a digitization drive to provide safe, secure and improved governance services to citizens across the expansive country.²⁷ Contactless disbursement of benefits, growing use of robots and drones (like for spraying disinfectants and monitoring containment zones), and using data from tracking apps like Aarogya Setu to inform and drive public policy are examples of this.²⁸

Considering this, India is very much a technological competitor to China. Their intense rivalry in the critical technology sector is already evident in several defense-related domains, including space. The space programs of both countries are today driven primarily by security and defense related concerns, which has compelled both to invest in innovation, research and development of advanced technologies that can pose a challenge to the other.²⁹ The prestige and technonationalism that characterized the US-Soviet competition during the Cold War is now visible not only in the US-China contest, but also on the regional scale between India and China.³⁰ In essence, India sees itself as locked into a technological competition with China, which gives it much in common with the US when it comes to the US-China rivalry. India's cautious stance on AUKUS – which essentially leaves a door open for collaboration with the defense technology focused trilateral – reflects just this.

India and AUKUS: Potential for Collaboration?

Simply put, AUKUS provides India the opportunity to put its own geostrategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region beyond the Quad or US leadership. As Washington shows eagerness to

invest in resources beyond the Quad—without even making them part of the conversation—India too must look at AUKUS as a way to build its own partnerships bilaterally. With China—with whom India shares a long-standing border dispute as well—being a major and immediate security threat, AUKUS presents opportunities to counter Beijing’s belligerence. While it may not directly support India in the same at the LAC or the Indian Ocean, it will make China rethink its moves especially in a bid to avoid an arms race that while arming China will also actively armor its competitive powers in response. Yet, as AUKUS impacts arrangements such as the India-Australia-France trilateral³¹—which is still in its nascent stages and has now already had a meeting cancelled³² due to fissure in Australia-France ties post cancellation of the submarine deal—New Delhi must actively look to prevent any further adverse causality impact on its own growth.

There is anxiety that the arrangement could ultimately prompt a swarming of nuclear-powered general-purpose attack submarines (dubbed the SSNs by the US Navy) in the Eastern Indian Ocean, disintegrating India’s local power. The Indian Navy by and by rules this space, yet its underwater capabilities have been contracting. India’s intentions to foster an armada of atomic assault submarines has evoked no proposal of help from the Washington. As a general rule, US does not share its valued atomic submarine technology with even its treaty allies (like Japan and South Korea) and close security partners (like India,³³ which has become a net security provider in the region);³⁴ it has repeatedly cited domestic laws as an impediment to any such transfer of sensitive nuclear technology and consistently refused discussing the same over the past fifteen years. However, Australia clearly marks an exception to this policy, coming as only the second state ever (after the UK) to be granted this. Importantly, this marks a shift in the US’ strategic thinking, strategy and threat perception in the region. Whether AUKUS also implies a shift in the US’ staunch policy on sharing of nuclear defense technology remains to be seen, and will be a key point of interest for India.

Washington’s ability to assist Canberra with building SSNs raises the likelihood that Australia could convey atomic submarines in the Eastern Indian Ocean a long time before India positions its own. The Indian Navy, the central security supplier in the Eastern Indian Ocean, is not building submarines at a speed comparable with needs.³⁵ Despite China’s developing submarine

presence in the district, in any case, Indian authorities are not happy with the possibility of amicable SSNs in India's strategic backyard unless they are put there by New Delhi itself. From a national interest and strategic angle, the time for New Delhi to push for its own nuclear propulsion tech is now —and it could look to France, a key defence partner who at present is reeling from the economic and trust repercussions of the cancellation of the Australian USD 66 billion submarine deal.³⁶ Even as the US-India relations have grown, India does remain wary of the US as a long-term and active partner for the region. The same is evident as India actively refrains from alliance building or stating that Quad is an anti-China alliance or even showing open dedication to a US-led order; these factors shape India's 'strategic autonomy' quest and could very well have let US view Australia as a better partner.

It remains important for the US to note that while AUKUS could indeed emerge as a major minilateral, the Quad supersedes it vis-à-vis power and influence especially due to the inclusion of Asian giants India and Japan in the same. The amount of influence India and Japan hold bilaterally and individually in the Indo-Pacific and Asian region cannot be matched by Australia or US alone; Delhi and Tokyo have been consistent long-term contributors to the region with close ties with regional bodies, littoral states and comparatively better ties with China too. Washington must seek to assure India that AUKUS will not limit Washington's focus on the Quad or the India-US partnership and inwardly recalibrate and recalculate the importance it should accord to New Delhi with a focus on its long-term ambitions in the region.

Conclusion: A Middle Power Nexus

In brief, AUKUS is therefore a complementary mechanism to India's regional interests and could be an effective way for realizing New Delhi's shared objectives in the region. India is on the cusp, if not already undergoing, the fourth industrial revolution, and as the time becomes ripe for it to reinvent itself as a domain leader, middle power technology partnerships will become a key aspect of India's strategic thinking. Even as India recognizes the technological threat posed by China, and finds increasing synergy with Washington in countering this threat, enhancing middle powerism is likely to remain a key strategy for India.

The US-China technological competition poses a geopolitical risk for India in that it is likely to spur Chinese advancements at an exponential pace, causing a further security risk for New Delhi. Further, the fourth industrial revolution has somewhat bifurcated global tech governance and forced smaller states to navigate great power politics and rivalries to ensure they do not get caught in the middle. Here, as a middle power in the region that has long sought to protect its strategic autonomy and maintain a non-aligned foreign policy (which has now shifted to a pointed alignment strategy), India can take a lead in bringing together middle powers across the globe – such as Japan, South Korea,³⁷ the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the EU. Such a collaboration could look at areas like enhancing technological capacity, coordinating international standards and technological governance norms and laws, and networks for research and innovation.

India has both the intent and the capacity to be a proactive, committed actor and could build on its existing digital partnerships to shape the global commons. The fourth industrial revolution has become a politically heated space as both the US and China vie for dominance to further their vastly differing interests. This has essentially created a vacuum in global governance of the technological space, amidst challenges posed by geopolitical complexities and systemic changes induced by the fourth industrial revolution.

Notes

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