

Does AUKUS Toll the Knell of the Quad?

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DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2025.v10i11.002 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2025.v10i11.002>

Received: 28 September 2025 / Accepted: 20 October 2025 / Published: 21 November 2025

ABSTRACT

Washington's primary motivation for a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States was to amass all help from all sources in the Indo-Pacific to counter increasingly formidable Chinese military. Unfortunately, the announcement of the AUKUS itself has become a formidable block in the way of achieving its primary goal of forming an increasingly unified and capable coalition of democracies against Chinese aggression. The Quad has seen momentum in terms of engagement in the last two years, especially in the backdrop of a violent stand-off between India and China along the disputed boundary in Eastern Ladakh last year. However, India does not see a military dimension to the Quad. New Delhi has reiterated this stand on several occasions. So, the limiting factor for deepening military engagement for the Quad as a grouping is India. This lukewarm position of India belies the sanctity of the Quad before the new security arrangement-AUKUS.

Introduction

The announcement of the new Australia-U.K.-U.S. (AUKUS) trilateral security agreement, just ahead of a few days of the first in-person Quad Leaders' Summit to be hosted by U.S. President Joe Biden on September 24, 2021 in Washington has created much debate in strategic circles. The alliance will see a reshaping of relations in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. During Barak Obama's regime America had begun to discuss the need to focus more attention on the Indo-Pacific region while keeping away from conflicts in West Asia. Now, while finding that tensions with China have only grown, the U.S. has withdrawn its troops from Afghanistan. The present U.S. administration, as also the aggrieved parties in the Pacific like Australia, Japan, Taiwan and India, has been concerned about China's actions in the South China Sea. The origin of the Quad is to be traced in the fear of the United States of America of the devilish machinations of Yellow man at the international level in general and also in the Indo-Pacific in particular. Even though this has not been explicitly stated, undoubtedly, rapid militarization and aggressive behavior of China is the trigger. The consequence of rapid increase in China's

economic capacities, and particularly its belligerence, has led to a tectonic shift in regional security paradigms. Japan, for example, has increased its annual defense estimates. The Japanese defense Ministry proposed a budget of U.S.\$50 Billion for the fiscal year 2022, sacrificing the traditional ceiling of limiting defense spending to under 1% of GDP. Its defense White Paper highlights the urgent need to take stock of developments around Taiwan.¹ Similarly, Australia's defense budget has increased outlays for the ninth consecutive year.

The Quadrilateral Dialogue or the Quad.

After the Quadrilateral Dialogue via on-line summit on March 12, 2021, the four Quad members, namely the U S, Japan, Australia and India, the chief concern of the forum was declared: "Together, we commit to promoting a free, open, rules-based order, rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond... We refrain our strong support for ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific."² Briefing the media about the quad summit Jake Sullivan, U.S National Security Advisor said that partners had raised their issues with China which included China's coercion of Australia, their harassment around the Senkaku Islands, and their aggression on the border with India. The opening remarks by the Quad leaders were remarkably concise. Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted that the Quad would "play the role of a force for global good". Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison stressed on the point that the grouping wanted the Indo-Pacific region to "be always free from coercion". And, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga projected the Quad as "an extremely significant initiative", designed to promote "a free and open international order based on the rule of law in the Indo-Pacific".³ Mr. Biden portrayed the Quad as a group of democratic partners "who share a worldview and have a common vision for the future". During the leaders' meet U.S President Joe Biden has exposed priority of the United States' recent foreign policy-"the Indo-Pacific" and described it as an area of strategic significance and the associated alignment, which serves as the basis of this geopolitical concept-the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. In the meeting, all the leaders of the four member countries, Joe Biden (USA), Narendra Modi (India), Scott Morrison (Australia) and Yoshihide Suga (Japan) affirmed their commitment to a "free, open, resilient and inclusive" Indo-Pacific.⁴

The establishment of the Quad had instilled much hope and vigor among the Asian partners of the forum, namely India and Japan, especially India in the wake of China's threat on the border and her malignant nexus with Pakistan. The Washington summit added new areas of collaboration which includes infrastructure, cybersecurity and space; education and people-to-people relations, though priority is given to sustainable infrastructure with a stress on aligning the Quad with G7's Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership which itself is based on the G20s quality infrastructure investment principles. But, quite contrary to the established goals, all the Quad members have put security considerations under the sleeves while engaging Quad

platforms. But the new Australia-U.K.-U.S. (AUKUS) Trilateral Security Partnership and the outcome of the Quad summit seems to be giving an unwelcome message to the Quad that the AUKUS is going to become a key security arrangement of the Indo-Pacific region and it will be virtually forcing the Quad to recede to the background in a major effort to exhibit power, attention, political will and resources.⁵ As a matter of fact, whatever be the arguments behind this hasty move by the Biden administration, a sense of wariness looms large in Delhi. Far from being a subtle hint of U.S. favoritism for Australia, the agreement suggests preferential treatment on the part of Washington for a close Anglo-alliance partner. Speaking to reporters ahead of the announcement, senior American officials outlined the nature of AUKUS as security focused, suggesting it was different from-but complementary to arrangements such as the Quad. A senior Biden administration official who briefed the media about the AUKUS deal underscored the “very rare” nature of the arrangement and the “extremely sensitive” technology that will be shared with Australia.

The First Meeting of the Quad Leaders

The first in-person meeting of the Quad leaders in the East Room of the White House, on 24 September, 2021, comprising Prime Minister Narendra Modi, U.S. President Joe Biden and Prime Ministers Scott Morrison of Australia and Yoshihide Suga of Japan declared new joint positions in Afghanistan. In their joint statement, the Quad leaders declared they would closely coordinate their “diplomatic, economic and human rights policies” towards Afghanistan. They also decided to deepen their counterterrorism and humanitarian cooperation in Afghanistan in accordance with the United Nations Security Council 2593(a resolution passed on August 30, when India held the presidency of the Council). The resolution seeks a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan and calls for the country not to be used as a base to nurture terrorism. The leaders have put forth ambitious initiatives that deepen mutual ties and advance practical cooperation on 21st century challenges: ending the COVID-19 pandemic, including by increasing production and access to safe and effective vaccines; promoting high-standards infrastructure; combating the climate crisis; partnering on emerging technologies, space, and cyber security; and cultivating next generation talent in all the Quad countries. The outcome of the meeting is conspicuous for absence of several core issues that concern security threats faced by member countries and the Indo-Pacific stalemate. Leaders of the forum still kept security concerns in Pandora box.

New Delhi’s Awkward Position

So far, a lot of commentary talked how the announcement of the new trilateral security agreement is welcome step for India to access technologies, build complementarities and so on. At the same time the AUKUS could pose unique challenges for India, depending on how China responds to it. Already, China has sharply reacted to the announcement of AUKUS, and this may

lead to further proliferation of tension between the two Asian giants. The possibility of China involving its closest partner, Pakistan, also cannot be ruled out. New Delhi seems to replicate its stand in the Malabar naval exercise and the Quad, when it had ruled out any link between the two, in the case of the relation with the Quad and the AUKUS also. This assessment is consistent with India's response to the creation of the AUKUS, which found expression in the words of Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla, "From our perspective, this is neither relevant to the Quad nor will it have any impact on its functioning". Technically, this stand may be correct, mainly because these groupings differ in their institutional architecture. If such technicalities are set aside, it is evident that these groupings share a larger vision about the Indo-Pacific. "be it AUKUS, which enables Australia to stand up to Chinese bullying or provides the United Kingdom-its aircraft carrier, HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, the flagship of the U.K.'s Carrier Strike Group, it is in the region-with a more prominent, and desirable, role in the Indo-Pacific or in the annual Malabar exercises which focus on the Indo-Pacific or the Quad, their common geopolitical theatre is the Indo-Pacific".⁶ Despite this initial indifference towards the AUKUS, New Delhi may realize some secondary benefits from the Trilateral Security Arrangement in future, when three advanced nations with sophisticated military know-how in the world coming together to support a free and open Indo-Pacific. Besides, the Belt and Road Initiative, including through projects or proposals for infrastructure development in Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and beyond into Central Asia, fears in South Block over 'encirclement' by China may be partially mitigated by AUKUS.

AUKUS

Washington's primary motivation for a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States was to amass all help from all sources in the Indo-Pacific to counter increasingly formidable Chinese military. Unfortunately, the announcement of the AUKUS itself has become a formidable block in the way of achieving its primary goal of forming an increasingly unified and capable coalition of democracies against Chinese aggression. On September 15, 2021 U.S. President Biden said the partnership "will bring together our sailors, our scientists, and our industries to maintain and expand our edge in military capabilities and critical technologies, such as cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and undersea domains".⁷ The AUKUS in effect cancel Australia-France deal to build new diesel submarines for the Australian navy and establish an Australia-U.S.-U.K. agreement to build nuclear- powered submarines for the Australian navy. The technology is expected to provide Australia with the capability of confronting China's naval threat. Submarines constitute the most potent and security military platform to asymmetrically counter an adversary. "The proposed nuclear submarines, whether the U.K.'s Astute-class attack submarine or the U.S.'s Virginia-class vessel, will potentially be fully equipped with advanced U.S. weapons such as the Mark-48

torpedoes, the Harpoon anti-ship missiles and the Tomahawk cruise missiles. These will give Australia quite a punch in terms of a stand-off capability".⁸The AUKUS mission of making Australia a naval power with nuclear powered submarines is very crucial to the U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific for two reasons: (i) The declining size of America's submarines; (ii) People's Liberation Army Navy fields more than sixty attack submarines in the Indo-Pacific. Whereas the U.S. must deploy its submarines around the world, China focuses almost all of its submarines in the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific is an area where U.S.-China conflict is most likely to occur. Here lies the real benefit for the United States. The additional highly capable submarines produced under AUKUS agreement will help the country to overcome the eroding maritime balance of power between China and countries that support a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. Similarly, though not in the same measure of the advantages the U.S. is expected to cut out from the AUKUS, the United Kingdom has also some advantages. The AUKUS provides a fresh opportunity to the U.K. to reinsert itself more directly into the Indo-Pacific.

Mixed Responses in India

However, Indian observers generally evoke mixed feelings. Notwithstanding certain ominous remarks, many are happy in getting quality nuclear submarine technology for Australia from the U.S and U.K which in the final analysis means strengthening the Quad and strengthening China deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, no observer, with reasonable degree of sanity, can be accused of any kind of malignantpropaganda if they blame the hasty steps that led to the displeasure of France, India's foremost partner in the Indo-Pacific.⁹ In this dismal background, if AUKUS weaken the vigor and enthusiasm around the Quad, it would be undesirable as far as concerned India's interests in the Indo-Pacific region. The Quad has seen momentum in terms of engagement in the last two years, especially in the backdrop of a violent stand-off between India and China along the disputed boundary in Eastern Ladakh last year. However, India does not see a military dimension to the Quad. New Delhi has reiterated this stand on several occasions. So, the limiting factor for deepening military engagement for the Quad as a grouping is India. This lukewarm position of India belies the sanctity of the Quad before the new security arrangement-AUKUS. Essentially, the Quad is taking shape as an organization of broader cooperation among the four countries, while AUKUS remains an organization for high-end military trade. But some observers believe that it is unlikely that the AUKUS is going to become a game changer. Firstly, they point out that the U.S., as a leading global military power, already has a strong presence in the Indo-Pacific, especially in a group that includes Australia, India, and Japan-the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or the Quad. There is joint military presence in the Indo-Pacific, and a wide array of war games in the region.¹All this points to a vigorous strengthening of bilateral, trilateral

¹ In April 2021, France, has historically been an Indo-Pacific power with territories and bases across the region, like the United Kingdom, participated in a multi-nation naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal with the four Quad nations (the U.S., Japan, Australia and India)

and multilateral security dialogues and structures. Similarly, they argue, the U.S., the U.K., Australia, Canada, and New Zealand are members of Five Eyes, an intelligence-sharing alliance, which also has regional security implications. "It is unclear what additional signaling could be achieved through the new trilateral security arrangement that does not fall within the ambit of the Quad".¹⁰ Secondly, the AUKUS is not expected to deter China's strategic calculus across the region, particularly relating to its maritime ambitions and territorial expansionism. However, the commentators point out that there is one element of AUKUS that has potential to cause a recalibration of China's plans-the nuclear powered submarines.² Although seemingly different in scope and activity, all these hectic efforts converge on the core issue of maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. To be precise, the AUKUS is not a substitute for the Quad, and it does not erode the Quad's significance as a platform for consultations and coordination on broader themes of maritime security, free and open trade, health care, critical technologies, supply chains and capacity-building.¹¹

Certainly, if France had not been provoked by the cancellation of \$90 billion contract with Australia for submarines, the unwanted clash of interests between the big powers in the Indo-Pacific would have been averted. There is a bad omen for India, at least some Quad sceptics would say, that if Australia and America could deceive France, a NATO partner and a traditional friend of the USA, who can assure that they would not deceive a lesser ally like India.

The undesirable disunity in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is also a matter of serious concern in this context. The Southeast Asian Nations have always neglected core issues such as developments in Myanmar or the strategic threats posed by China. But the AUKUS is clearly an attempt by the U.S. to beef up regional security, including securing Australia's seaborne trade. Such a sudden increase in Australia's naval capacities will help only to cause tension in the region. Australia has already reassured the region, in a statement on September 20, 2021, of its commitment to ASEAN centrality and its continued support for the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone Treaty as well as the Treaty of Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone. Notwithstanding the fact that Australia denies AUKUS the status of a defense alliance, China is not prepared to retreat from exploiting ASEAN's concerns at having caught in between the two powerful rivals, U.S. and China. "True to style, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman has criticized AUKUS as an "exclusive bloc" and "clique" that gravely undermines regional peace and security and reflects a Cold War mentality."¹²

² The countries that have such submarines operational are the U.S. (68), Russia (29), China (12), the U.K. (11), France (8) and India (1). Given this skewed capability, which implies Chinese dominance across the Indo-Pacific, the effect of AUKUS facilitating the development of a nuclear fleet for Australia may change the scales for bad, perhaps by heightening China's anxiety over its nuclear-powered submarine fleet. In the arms race that follows in the region, stakes over strategic flashpoints such as the South China Sea and Taiwan.

French-US Relations

Bilateral relations had always been important for both France and the United States of America. Traditionally, it has been peaceful except for the Quasi-war in 1798-1799 and fighting against Vichy France in 1942-1944 during World War II. In the 21st century, during the Iraq War, each country lowered favorability ratings of the other. “However, relations improved over the decade after the beginning of the war, with American favorable ratings of France reaching a historic high of 87% in 2016.¹³ But the announcement in mid-September of AUKUS, Franco-American relations have reached a historic low point. Evidently, France is in fury. Paris has recalled its ambassador to Australia. The announcement resulted in an unprecedented diplomatic crisis between the United States of America and France. The loss of submarine contract with Australia was beyond the level of diplomatic terms to define and France sharply responded with strong words. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian described the cancellation as a “stab in the back.” French officials said their government had been blindsided by the cancellation of the contract with Australia. France even resorted to recall its ambassador to Washington after finding out that the U.S. and Britain struck a deal behind its back to build nuclear-powered submarines for Australia. “Paris insists its tantrum was not about money-though the loss of the subs deal dealt a blow to French shipbuilding”.¹⁴ Paris explained AUKUS as a “breach of trust”, accusing Washington, Canberra and London of total lack of consultation over a partnership directly impacting and limiting France’s strategy in the Indo-Pacific region. However, Washington quickly came to realize that the situation was far more serious. The U.S. understood the larger implications of this crisis and decided to take necessary steps to reset relations with France. “At the COP26 meeting at Glasgow, U.S. President Joe Biden tried to smoothen ruffled feathers when he candidly told his French counterpart, President Emmanuel Macron, that the Australian submarine deal with France had been handled clumsily”.¹⁵ Biden also added that he was under the impression that France had been informed long before. An assuaged France is bound to come around eventually since the Trans-Atlantic partnership is important for both sides. Washington realized that tangible commitments would also be needed to demonstrate its genuine desire to repair and improve its partnership with France. As a result, France and the United States engaged in high-level consultations for several weeks to develop fruitful initiatives.¹⁶

Dialogues do not Ease Tension

Amidst the growing Cold War-like situation, unilateral statements and bilateral dialogues between the United States of America and China are going on. On 11 November, 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping warned against letting tensions in the Asia-Pacific region cause a relapse into a Cold War mentality. “The Asia-Pacific region cannot and should not relapse into the confrontation and division of the Cold War era,” he said.¹⁷ His remarks on the sidelines of the

annual summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) were conspicuous, as it was, at a time when the U.S., Britain and Australia had established AUKUS a few weeks ahead.

The virtual meeting on 15 November 2021 between American President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping, lasted about three hours seemed to be an icebreaking start to assuage the turbulent relationship on global stage. "As I have said before, it seems to be our responsibility as leaders of China and the United States is to ensure that the competition between our countries does not veer into conflict, whether intended or unintended" Biden told Xi.¹⁸ The U.S. President also added that the United States need to increase communication and cooperation.

"However, both sides held firm to their position on the issues that divide Washington and Beijing, with Xi warning that the U.S and Taiwan are playing with fire over the self-governing island that China considers part of its territory."¹⁹ Pouring more fuel to the stand-off between the two powers, the first-ever summit for democracy, inaugurated by the U.S. President Joe Biden, warning that the world was at an inflection point in history to arrest the backward slide of democracy drew severe criticism from Russia and China. Biden's call for resurgence of democracy in his inaugural speech was ironically remarkable at a time when the credibility and integrity of the United States as an electoral democracy and constitutional republic was under scrutiny. Biden's call for safeguarding rights and freedoms in the face of rising authoritarianism was in effect, though indirectly, a sharp criticism of the Chinese communist regime. He said, "This is the defining challenge of our time. Democracy can at times be fragile. But it also is inherently resilient and capable of self-correction and is capable of self-improvement."²⁰ The summit was conspicuous amid charge of Russia and China that Washington is "weaponizing democracy". The summit was also remarkable in the context of sharp criticism from within the U.S. Richard Haas, a former U.S. official said, "Democracy summit is ill advised. We need nondemocracies to work with us on regional and global challenges; most important, U.S. is not in a position to preach or provide model. We should be focusing on getting our own broken house in order".²¹ Russia and China accused America of hypocrisy, claiming that they are better democracies than the U.S.

Quadrilateral Economic Forum is Crucial for India

The announcement of the quadrilateral economic forum by India, Israel, The United Arab Emirates and The United States, based on already existing cooperation between U.S., Israel and UAE after the Abraham Accords 2020, is very crucial in the Quad perspective. In the beginning of the Quadrilateral Dialogue, the partners had decided to establish an international forum for economic cooperation and discussed possibilities for joint infrastructure projects expanding economic and political cooperation in the Middle East and Asia. This non-ideological engagement with the Middle-East is undoubtedly a diplomatic gain for India. With the

normalization agreements signed between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain under the machinations of the United States, India now faces fewer challenges in West Asia.²² The new Quad will be an encouragement to India's West Asia policy. Business groups in India, the UAE and Israel have also been in talks for trilateral cooperation since diplomatic ties were established. The forum will also focus on global public health and ways to counter the COVID-19 pandemic. The International Federation of Indo-Israel Chambers of Conference (IFIIC) has predicted that the potential for agreements backed by Israeli innovation, UAE funding and Indian manufacturing, given India's close ties and strategic partnership with the two other countries could cross \$100 billion by 2030."²³ Above all, the Quadrilateral Economic Forum enhances the depth of meaning and scope of the Quad in the overall perspective of partners in general and that of India in particular. "The new Quad platform will help India to pursue wide-ranging multilateral partnerships in the region. With major powers like France, Russia, China getting drawn to this region, the alliance will help India to shape its position in changing the geopolitics of this region."²⁴ Each country will appoint a senior professional to a joint working group. This joint working group will formulate options for cooperation in the focus areas identified by the new Quad.

The Quad and AUKUS are Complementary to Each Other

Neither the Quad nor the AUKUS are detrimental to each other. They may be distinct entities as institutional frameworks seeking new opportunities, power and deterrence against opponents. Yet, they are complementary to each other. "Whereas the Quad initiatives straddle the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, a Pacific-centric orientation for AUKUS has advantages. Such a strategy could potentially strengthen Japan's security as well as that of Taiwan in the face of China's mounting bellicosity. Shifting AUKUS'S fulcrum to the Pacific Ocean could reassure ASEAN nations. It could also inure AUKUS to any insidious insinuation that accretion in the number of nuclear submarines plying the Indo-Pacific might upset the balance of power in the Indian Ocean."²⁵

Considering the fact that China has a large and growing fleet under the sea, the United States has genuine interest to effectively counter China militarily. The current structure of the Quad is incapable to achieve this. Besides, it lacks the mandate to act in that direction. As clarified by the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, Wendy Sherman, the Quad is a "non-defense, non-military" arrangement.³ Similarly, China's economic power is insurmountable, at least for the present, even by the new economic cooperation under the auspices of the Quad countries. Here

³ In an interview organized by the think-tank Ananta in Mumbai in October 2021, Wendy Sherman said that "The Quad is a vehicle which largely operates in security realms that are non-military, non-defense. Things we do together on vaccines, and infrastructure, supply chains, technology and climate- all the forward-thinking areas in which we need to gain confidence and ensure security for our people"

lies the real significance of AUKUS. It provides an opportunity to the U.S. to place proxy submarine forces to limit China's more or less unilateral dominance in the Pacific Ocean.

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