

Australia at the Heart of Indo-Pacific Security Arrangements

By Mark R. Watson

By happy coincidence or extraordinary foresight, this [US Indo-Pacific Strategy at One Year event](#) arrives the day after the most momentous statement of intent and action in relation to Indo-Pacific Security in a generation: the AUKUS (a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) pathways announcements.

Mark R. Watson,
Director,
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So why AUKUS; why now? The AUKUS agreement only exists in its current form because it is the common view of the AUKUS countries that the international security dynamic in the Indo-Pacific, and its Asia-Pacific sub-region in particular, has deteriorated to the point where cooperative action on a scale unmatched since the Second World War is not just desirable, but essential.

How does AUKUS—or the Quad, or the reinvigorated bilateral relationships being built within those frameworks—contribute to bolstering security in the Indo-Pacific? Of course, there may be variations in answers to that question depending on whether you are examining the current strategic circumstances looking out from a window in Tokyo, Washington, New Delhi, or Canberra, but analyzing the outlook from each capital has led the respective national governments to reach a series of common conclusions:

1. China's military modernization and expansion have created a strategic imbalance in the Indo-Pacific that must be addressed.
2. There is strength in the unity of like-minded countries, or at least in broad-based and integrated cooperation.
3. The current threat conditions in the Asia-Pacific are so severe that they may require abandoning or seriously modifying longstanding strategic policies, such as:
 - India's traditional policy of 'non-alignment' in its international relations;
 - the United States' previous refusal to share nuclear technology, even with a long-standing ally like Australia; and
 - Japan's historical unwillingness to bolster defense and security actions, as it could be misinterpreted as remilitarization.

Each of these policy settings has required substantive modifications to accommodate the new mini-laterals, AUKUS and the Quad.

For Australia in particular, AUKUS and the Quad make sense when viewed against the backdrop of years enduring Chinese economic coercion, interference in domestic politics, and intimidation of Australia's Chinese and Uyghur diaspora. The case for cooperative international security arrangements with like-minded countries becomes compelling when the PLA's modernization expansion program, geographic annexations, the militarization of maritime features in the South China Sea, and disregard for international legal norms are added to the menu of bilateral hostility.

Australia relies on 'freedom of navigation' on the ocean to deliver 99% by weight, and 75% by value, of its international trade in goods. Thus, Australia is particularly sensitive to threats or potential threats to critical shipping lanes to our north and northwest. Hence Australia's enthusiasm for a nuclear-propelled conventionally armed submarine fleet. A fleet capable of traveling further, staying submerged for longer, and remaining

undetected affords more protection to vital shipping lanes and projects power at greater distances than the Australian Defense Force is currently able to do.

Australia also sees economic, military, and security logic in joining a community of like-minded countries to restore a comparative advantage in the advanced technologies underpinning its future defense capabilities.

While some of those arguments may apply on some level to other nations, I would argue that Australia's position is unique among the Quad and AUKUS partners. For Australia, the AUKUS and Quad agreements are only the latest responses to deep-seated national insecurity—a product of Australia's history and geography—which has built an instinctive acceptance of, even reliance on, multilateral or minilateral arrangements unparalleled elsewhere.

Since Australia was inaugurated as a nation in 1901, it has had at least one eye on the insurance of 20th century multilateral arrangements. Australia has been an enthusiastic 'joiner,' indeed a foundation member of the League of Nations, the United Nations, [SEATO](#), the [FPDA](#), the WTO, APEC, IPEF, RCEP, CPTPP, the Partners in the Blue Pacific Partnership among others.

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Today, Australia's core national security agreements—the 5 Eyes intelligence sharing arrangements, the Quad, AUKUS, ANZUS, and reinvigorated bilateral agreements, particularly with Japan—nest, one within the other, like matryoshka dolls. Given current international circumstances, perhaps a better simile would be a Venn diagram of overlapping and interlocking circles of strategic engagement, with the Australian flag planted firmly at the center of the diagram, the one country common to all the agreements and Venn circles identified above. Not even the United States sits alongside us there, having opted out of the Transpacific Partnership.

This interlocking geometry of security arrangements, trade agreements, treaties, and dialogues bolster not just Australia's national security but the security of the Indo-Pacific in four very important ways:

1. **By maintaining focus on the Indo-Pacific here in Washington DC**, a city and a policy community that (historically at least) is by inclination and education Atlanticist.
2. **By delivering enhanced trading arrangements** that not only build economic prosperity—a security positive in its own right—but also build an *interdependency* of economic prosperity.
3. **By engaging India in a manner and at a pace with which India is comfortable.** There is no "Indo-Pacific" without India. The Quad plays a critical role in taking Australia beyond its traditional Anglosphere connections of the Five Eyes, AUKUS and ANZUS in an arrangement that connects East and West, Global North and Global South, particularly "Indo" and "Pacific."
4. The fact that the Quad is not a formal (or even an informal) defense pact is often criticized as indicative of its weakness but, on the contrary, it is **the unique nature of the Quad's emphasis on the 'soft power'** elements of international strategic policy (pandemic response, emergency planning, cooperation on cyber, counter-terrorism maritime domain awareness, and environmental issues) that enables the Quad partners, and India in particular, to claim a role for the partnership not just in enhancing the security of the partner nations, but of nations across the broader Indo-Pacific theatre.

In short, Australia sees its role in bolstering the prospects of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific in the strength it has always found in multilateral and minilateral arrangements.

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