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The price of American hegemony in Asia

With AUKUS, the US gets serious about containing China. But Australia and Europe should ask themselves if US primacy in Asia is a worthwhile goal

When US President Joe Biden, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced the formation of AUKUS on 16 September, the Australian debate about this new tripartite security initiative quickly took on a familiar form.

AUKUS became a proxy for a question that has tormented Australian security thinkers ever since it became obvious that China was on a trajectory towards becoming the largest economic and military force in Asia, and potentially the world: what limits will America try to impose on China's ambitions for regional leadership, and what is Australia's role in that enterprise?

The reason AUKUS became such a useful proxy for this broader debate is that the agreement itself is still rather opaque, and therefore open to various interpretations. Some regard it only as a defence technology sharing agreement, focused in the first instance on equipping the Royal Australian Navy with at least eight new nuclear-powered submarines, but also progressing into 'cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities.'

Yet to read AUKUS narrowly as a technology-sharing deal, we have to ignore what the leaders themselves said when they launched it. Prime Minister Morrison called it a 'forever partnership' that would 'deliver a safer and more secure region that ultimately benefits all'. President Biden also emphasised security goals, but in geographic terms, he went further still, saying that AUKUS was a signal that 'there is no regional divide separating the interests of our Atlantic and Pacific partners.'

The US containment of China

Nobody doubts that China is the driving motivation for AUKUS. If China was not undergoing the most rapid maritime modernisation of any country since the US Navy under the Reagan Administration, it is difficult to imagine that Washington would have agreed to sell nuclear technology it has only once before shared with a foreign partner (the UK).

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Yet that still leaves open a critical question about US grand strategy: are agreements such as AUKUS designed to further America's ultimate aim of maintaining its status as unrivalled strategic leader of Asia, or is the US willing to share power with China?

It is easy to make a case for the first interpretation, at least based on what the United States says. The Trump Administration's Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific, declassified in January 2021, says plainly that the uppermost challenge for US policy in the region is 'how to maintain US strategic primacy'. President Biden said in March 2021 that 'China has an overall goal [...] to become [...] the most powerful country in the world [...] That's not going to happen on my watch'. Yet rhetoric has not been matched by action. America's military footprint in Asia hasn't grown much over the last decade, especially when compared to the rapid rise of Chinese military capacity. Obama's 'pivot' to Asia, announced in 2011, is widely acknowledged to have been under-resourced.

In that context, AUKUS can be seen a strong sign of American commitment to containing China. Nuclear propulsion technology is closely guarded, so this is much more than an ordinary arms deal; it is a major commitment of American technology. And if primacy is the goal, then Australia has made its clearest commitment yet to supporting it. Australia has been content to demonstrate its fidelity to its alliance with the US by supporting Washington's security goals in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

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It has, however, been less forthright when it comes to issues that directly affect Chinese interests. For instance, despite American encouragement, Australia has still not conducted freedom of navigation missions

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within 12 nautical miles of China's artificial islands in the South China Sea. It joined China's international development bank while Washington remained suspicious. And in 2019 the suggestion that the US might ask Australia to host American intermediate-range missiles on its territory was met with a swift denial by the Morrison Government. That period of reticence appears to be over. As well as the submarine deal, the Australian government is encouraging speculation about permanent American bases in Australia.

Is American primacy in Asia worth it?

What's troubling about this is that it implies full confidence in America's ability to win such a contest for leadership in Asia, and that Australia must do what it can to ensure victory. But China is the biggest challenger the US has ever faced. As former Brookings scholar and now China adviser in the National Security Council Rush Doshi has observed, in the last century no American adversary or coalition of adversaries has ever reached 60 percent of US GDP. China passed that mark as early as 2014.

It's an arresting statistic, which should encourage Australian policy-makers to ask if the maintenance of American primacy in Asia is a realistic or even worthwhile goal. US primacy has certainly been advantageous for Australia, but the price of keeping America at the top is now rising dramatically.

European powers should also be asking themselves about their interests in Asia. Australia's decision to commit to either American or British nuclear-powered submarines meant that the deal to buy French boats had to be cancelled, leading to much introspection about France's future role in the Pacific. Britain's involvement in AUKUS has also raised questions about its ambitions in this part of the world.

In June, NATO identified China as a 'systemic challenger'. But it is difficult to see what vital strategic interest is at stake for NATO and the European powers in Asia. China clearly means to revise what it regards as a Western imposed rules-based order, and it would probably like to push the US out of the region altogether. However, that is not enough reason for Europe to involve itself in a power struggle against a nation that offers massive economic opportunity, but which poses no military threat to Europe.



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