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The AUKUS security pact: aligning Australia's strategy with America's geopolitical vision

Arnaud Peyronnet

FMES associate member of the Strategic Monitoring Centre for the Mediterranean and the Middle East (OS2MO)

SUMMARY:

The announcement on 17 September 2021 of the AUKUS strategic agreement between Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom is the conclusion of a process of transformation of Australia's strategic vision, which is as of now staked solely on that of the US in order to stem Chinese military activity in the Western Pacific. This new alignment is accompanied by the surrender of any autonomy in the matter of purchasing military equipment, with Canberra from now on relying on American or indeed British material, seen as a guarantee of interoperability for American protection. The pact also allows the United Kingdom once more to establish itself in the Pacific, for the long term and in line with its post-Brexit strategy of Global Britain, thanks to the restoration of historical links with its Commonwealth partner. Finally, it confirms Britain's alignment with America's strategy regarding China, with London presenting itself as the United States' faithful ally.

If this alignment means a huge loss of strategic autonomy for both countries, it establishes a new relationship between the power blocks in the Western Pacific, one that was already formulated as the Great Power Competition. It makes Australia a powerful back-up of the US throughout South-East Asia, something that can only concern the non-aligned states in the region (Malaysia and Indonesia) who could potentially, and with no say in the matter, become the theatre for competition between the two power blocks.

This major development establishes the Western Pacific as the new geopolitical centre of gravity for the next few decades.

AUSTRALIA'S COMPLETE ALIGNMENT WITH THE UNITED STATES

On 17 September 2021 Australia officially moved beyond the status of an ally of the United States to that of a strategic partner, through the creation of the AUKUS security pact (Australia, UK, US), established on a long-term military and technological programme agreed between the three countries¹. The announcement, which *de facto* broke Australia's contract to buy French made submarines, is above all a geostrategic initiative that over the next decades aims to counteract Chinese activism in the Pacific. Australian security concerns regarding Chinese activity in the region have in any case been

¹ This agreement will "link Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom together for generations", according to a statement that referenced "the common history of these maritime democracies". Joe Biden said: "This is about investing in our greatest source of strength — our alliances — and updating them to better meet the threats of today and tomorrow." *RFI*, 16/09/2021.

growing. Denouncements of Chinese interference in Australian politics, Beijing's influence in universities and accusations of Chinese spying and cyberattacks, along with the Australian demand for an international enquiry into the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic, are becoming more and more insistent. Economically, the Chinese technology manufacturer Huawei has been excluded from the Australian 5G network while agreements reached between Australian provinces and China have been rescinded *sine die* by Canberra on account of the threat to the national interest². Beyond these economic tensions, China's activities in the South China Sea and with regards to Taiwan have led Australia to harden its position vis-à-vis Beijing and to move closer to Taipei. This attitude has been very poorly received by the Chinese authorities who have responded through the media, saying that "if Australia were to take part in a war in the Straits of Taiwan, China would in that case have to plan reprisals against Australia"³.

Australia was already a close ally of the United States, with which it co-founded Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) that also includes Japan and India. Both countries are also linked by ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty), signed in 1951 and that provided the basis for the deployment of Australian soldiers alongside American forces in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. The new AUKUS strategic agreement is therefore nothing fundamentally new, even if Australia will from now on be more tightly integrated into America's sphere of influence. Any military intervention by the United States against China will probably involve Australian forces. If this alignment is seen by Canberra as a means of dissuading Beijing from carrying out hostile acts on its territory⁴, it also constitutes a significant loss of sovereignty for the country which will become completely dependent on the United States for its military equipment and for strategic decisions in the Indo-Pacific zone.

Beyond the controversial acquisition of eight nuclear attack submarines through its allies in the AUKUS pact⁵, the agreement also plans for the purchase of Tomahawk cruise missiles⁶ for its Hobart class destroyers, the acquisition of Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles (Extended Range), of Long-Range Anti-Ship Missiles (range: 900 kms/570 miles) for its F-18 and F-35 aircraft that have already been bought, or are in the process of being bought, from the United States.

Finally, AUKUS provides for the setting up of shared cyber, anti-submarine warfare and artificial intelligence capacities, the development of quantum and hypersonic missile technologies, along with the creation on Australian territory of a production line of precision munitions (a project valued at more than 1 billion dollars). It is worth noting that the American industrial complex Boeing has deviated from its principle of 'Made in America' for the production line of its new military drone, Loyal Wingman, which will be assembled in Australia, currently the only international client for this model⁷. Australia has therefore firmly decided on following the American path.

On 18 October 2021 this fundamental direction continued with American authorisation for the sale of E/A-18 Growler electronic warfare aircraft and MH-60R helicopters to Australia, the latter replacing the NH-90 helicopters ordered from the European consortium, NH Industries. The Australian minister of defence had already indicated in January 2021 that he wished to procure Apache attack helicopters to replace the Airbus Tiger helicopters currently in service⁸. Australian dependence on US equipment is therefore becoming structural.

² *Opex360*, 12/05/2021.

³ *Global Times* quoted in *Opex 360*, 12/05/2021.

⁴ *La Tribune*, 18/09/2021.

⁵ The new agreement also allows Australia to temporarily lease British or US submarines in order to develop Australian expertise in nuclear propulsion. Australia will become the 7th country in the world to have such submarines. The United States had until now only shared this technology with the British, under a treaty signed 1958 in the middle of the Cold War with the USSR.

⁶ *Naval News*, 17/09/2021.

⁷ *Les Echos*, 23/09/2021.

⁸ *Opex360* 11/10/2021.

The acquisition of such means, backed by a security agreement with a world superpower, could propel Australia to the status of a first rank geopolitical power, a veritable linchpin of the Indo-Pacific. This new status would present Australia with new challenges and would certainly lead to increased intervention on its northern borders, as far as the South China Sea (see map), in support of America's policy of containing Beijing. Australia is in fact ideally situated at the junction of the Pacific and Indian oceans. It constitutes a geophysical barrier to Chinese influence and an essential support base for US forces in the Pacific. If Chinese activism in South-East Asia has been seen for a long time by Canberra as a threat liable to destabilise the countries around its northern borders (in particular Indonesia and the Philippines), it has also become a way of tying the United States into the defence of its own territory.

STRENGTHENING THE DEFENCE OF THE NORTHERN MARITIME BORDER

For the last few years, the Australian government has been placing an emphasis on the acquisition of long-range military capabilities, in particular through the 2020 Defence Strategic Update which planned for the purchase of missiles, and of space and cybernetic capacities⁹. The new means allowed for by AUKUS, particularly nuclear submarines, are a part of this framework, extending Australia's defence capabilities by 2040 into expeditionary forces with an oceanic reach.

The Indo-Pacific continuum has been particularly present in Australian geostrategic thinking since 2013, concerned about Chinese military expansion along the trade routes leading to Australia. To become a key actor in the Indo-Pacific, Australia has to fill the strategic void currently to its north in order not to leave that to China. To this end, over the last few years it has begun a vast development programme of its naval capabilities in order to become a leading regional maritime power. This equipment programme costing €60 billion includes the construction of 12 corvettes (OPV-80 class, deliverable from 2022), 9 multi-role frigates (deliverable from 2029) supported by two refuelling ships. In the meantime, the Collins class submarines and the 8 ANZAC class frigates will be modernised and see their service life extended to keep them operational until 2027, or 2040 for the submarines. Australia has also developed its amphibious capabilities with 2 modern LHD helicopter carriers (equipped for the moment with F-35B fighters and V-22 Ospreys) and an LSD capable of projecting forces into the Pacific and Indian oceans in collaboration with units of the US Marines. The objective is to dispose of sufficient means to enable operations in a non-permissive archipelago environment. Australia is also going to acquire six maritime surveillance drones (MQ-4 Triton type) to complement the 12 P-8 maritime patrol aircraft that have already been ordered from the US aerospace industry. The Royal Australian Navy already has 3 modern Hobart class air warfare destroyers designed to establish a protective A2/AD perimeter in the north of Australia.

To improve its forward defence, Australia has joined with the United States to develop the naval base with its deep-water port at Lombrum in Papua New Guinea (Manus Island). Since 2017 an Australian force has deployed to Asia every year (Operation Pacific Endeavour) in order to familiarise itself with the local environment. The Royal Australian Air Force bases have also been modernised in order to allow the deployment of the RAAF's future F-35s as well as American aircraft. For their part the United States have deployed troops from the US Marine Corps to Darwin in the north of Australia since 2011, with bilateral agreements allowing for a maximum of 2,500 US military personnel in the sector should they be needed.

THE UNITED KINGDOM'S RETURN TO THE PACIFIC

By joining the strategic AUKUS agreement, the United Kingdom has significantly strengthened its posture in the Pacific, complementing its existing military presence in the Sultanate of Brunei¹⁰. Adding the United Kingdom to the AUKUS agreement is a manifestation of the Global Britain strategy promoted by Boris Johnson since the country's departure from the European Union and revitalises London's special relationship with Washington.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ London has an infantry battalion and a detachment of the Royal Air Force in this rich oil sultanate, that has been independent since 1984.

British links with Australia based above all on the Commonwealth, despite an Australian relationship with the monarchy that has not always been straightforward, had already been given a boost in recent years with the sale of 9 Type 31 frigates to Canberra. The announcement that 8 nuclear submarines would be delivered to Australia as part of the AUKUS agreement could extend this state of affairs, for at the very moment of the announcement the United Kingdom had just entrusted concept and design work for its future programme of nuclear attack submarines to its national industry (*BAE Systems*)¹¹. It is therefore possible that the United Kingdom hopes to involve Australia in the development of its submarines, thus ensuring significant economies of scale (as with the Type 31 frigates) and guaranteeing the survival of the programme¹². London would therefore, in time, have a first-rate support base in the island continent allowing it to extend its influence in Pacific, something it has been lacking since the loss of Hong Kong.

This switch of the United Kingdom's interest to the Pacific was demonstrated by London's decision to base a unit of the Royal Marines (Littoral Response Group) and two offshore patrol vessels permanently in the region (July 2021)¹³, at the very time the Queen Elizabeth carrier strike group had just been deployed there. Back in 2018 the former minister of defence, Gavin Williamson, had announced that the United Kingdom had to establish closer relations with Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Brunei and Japan¹⁴. Since summer 2018 the Royal Navy has been conducting FONOPS¹⁵ cruises in the South China Sea and the Straits of Taiwan¹⁶, while in 2019 one of its frigates took part in the United Nations' sanctions enforcement patrols against North Korea. In fact, since summer 2018 the Royal Navy has maintained an almost permanent naval presence in Asia.

This renewal of interest by the United Kingdom in the Pacific has of course to be seen in the context of the Great Power Competition between the United States and China. In aligning itself with the US's strategic preoccupations London is trying to become America's best ally again and is congratulating itself on the renewal of the special relationship it believes it has with Washington. The rise in power of Britain's aircraft carrier component has certainly contributed to this, with the British aircraft carriers regularly embarking US F-35B aircraft¹⁷. The British admiralty has even indicated that British aircraft carriers will in time be interchangeable with American carriers, thus demonstrating a wish for total interoperability.

REACTION TO THE POWER BLOCKS AND UNCERTAINTY WITHIN ASEAN

With the AUKUS agreement, President Biden hoped to solidify American alliances in the Asia-Pacific zone in order to resist Chinese naval expansionism. This objective emerged shortly after studies showed that the Chinese navy was quantitatively about to overtake the US Navy, something that caused a major upheaval amongst US strategists. AUKUS has therefore established a system of power blocks within the context of a new Cold War between the two world superpowers, as illustrated by the delivery of nuclear propelled warships to a third state. In this way, AUKUS has thus become the geopolitical centre of gravity for a regional military deterrence aimed at Beijing. Canberra could be Washington's ally of choice on the southern flank of a US operation aimed at defending, or even retaking Taiwan. Taipei has for that matter welcomed the pact, at a moment when tensions with China have reached a new level of seriousness¹⁸.

¹¹ British SSNR programme (*Submersible Ship Nuclear Replacement*), *Ouest France* 18/09/2021.

¹² In the short term this alliance nonetheless represents a risk for the Royal Navy's already limited resources, especially if Canberra decides to lease a British nuclear submarine (Astute class, or in the best option a Trafalgar class boat, recently retired from service) for training and exercise purposes.

¹³ *Opex360*, 21/07/2021.

¹⁴ A delicate rapprochement is in place with Japan, with Typhoon aircraft even being deployed on exercises with the Japanese air force, while an industrial partnership with Japan could be possible for the development of Tempest, the future fighter aircraft. *Opex360*, 29/09/2021.

¹⁵ *Freedom of Navigation Operations*.

¹⁶ A British warship sailed through the Straits of Taiwan on 27 September. This was the first such occurrence since 2008, *Le Figaro*, 27/09/2021.

¹⁷ These composed more than half of the air component (8 British F-35Bs and 10 USMC F-35Bs) embarked on the Queen Elizabeth during her recent deployment, demonstrating Britain's relative dependence on American resources, *USNI*, 29/04/2021.

¹⁸ Bearing in mind the incursion into Taiwan's air defence space of nearly 150 Chinese warplanes at the start of October 2021. *Washington Post*, 06/10/2021.

A Chinese diplomatic spokesperson decried an “extremely irresponsible” purchase that would intensify “the arms race” and seriously undermine “regional peace and stability”¹⁹. The Chinese state daily Global Times spoke of the risks of an arms war in the Pacific, specifying that “Australian soldiers would be the first to be killed” in the event of a Chinese counterattack²⁰. But the theatre for a potential military confrontation remains the arc of archipelagos in South-East Asia, in particular Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Malaysia expressed its concerns after the announcement of the new pact, stating it was worried about a regional arms race that it did not want to be dragged into²¹. Indonesia declared it was deeply “concerned about the growth of an arms race and the projection of power within the region” as well as by the persistent tensions in the region²². The agreement also displeased New Zealand which has rejected any use of nuclear fuels since 1985, stating that any of Australia’s future submarines would no longer be welcome. Only the Philippines welcomed the treaty, which according to their foreign minister²³ would allow for a balance of forces in the South China Sea thanks to Australia’s new capacity for projection that would allow for rapid intervention while awaiting US reinforcements.

Most ASEAN countries, that value their centrality and their non-alignment, are therefore uneasy with this new Anglo-Saxon treaty. Beyond the fact of having to choose between the power blocks and potentially finding themselves at the epicentre of a conflict between the major powers²⁴, these countries find themselves technologically outclassed. In this way South Korea which is developing a submarine to deliver cruise missiles, could find itself, like Canberra, tempted by nuclear vessels²⁵ supplied by its American ally. China could be tempted to supply this technology to its allies while also significantly increasing the number of its own nuclear attack submarines in the region. The possibility of seeing the Pacific and Indian oceans crisscrossed by the various powers’ nuclear submarines is now very real.

The AUKUS treaty therefore represents a veritable geopolitical rupture that has brought the Western Pacific into a confrontation of opposing power blocks not seen since the fall of the Soviet Union. Aligning itself with US policies has made Australia into a key state in the Indo-Pacific, able to provide through its future force projection capabilities the security required for civilian and military sea traffic while still remaining a major rear base area for any American effort against China.

¹⁹ AFP, 17/09/2021.

²⁰ BBC, 17/09/2021.

²¹ Reuters, 18/09/21.

²² Jakarta Post, quoted in *Courrier International*, 20/09/2021.

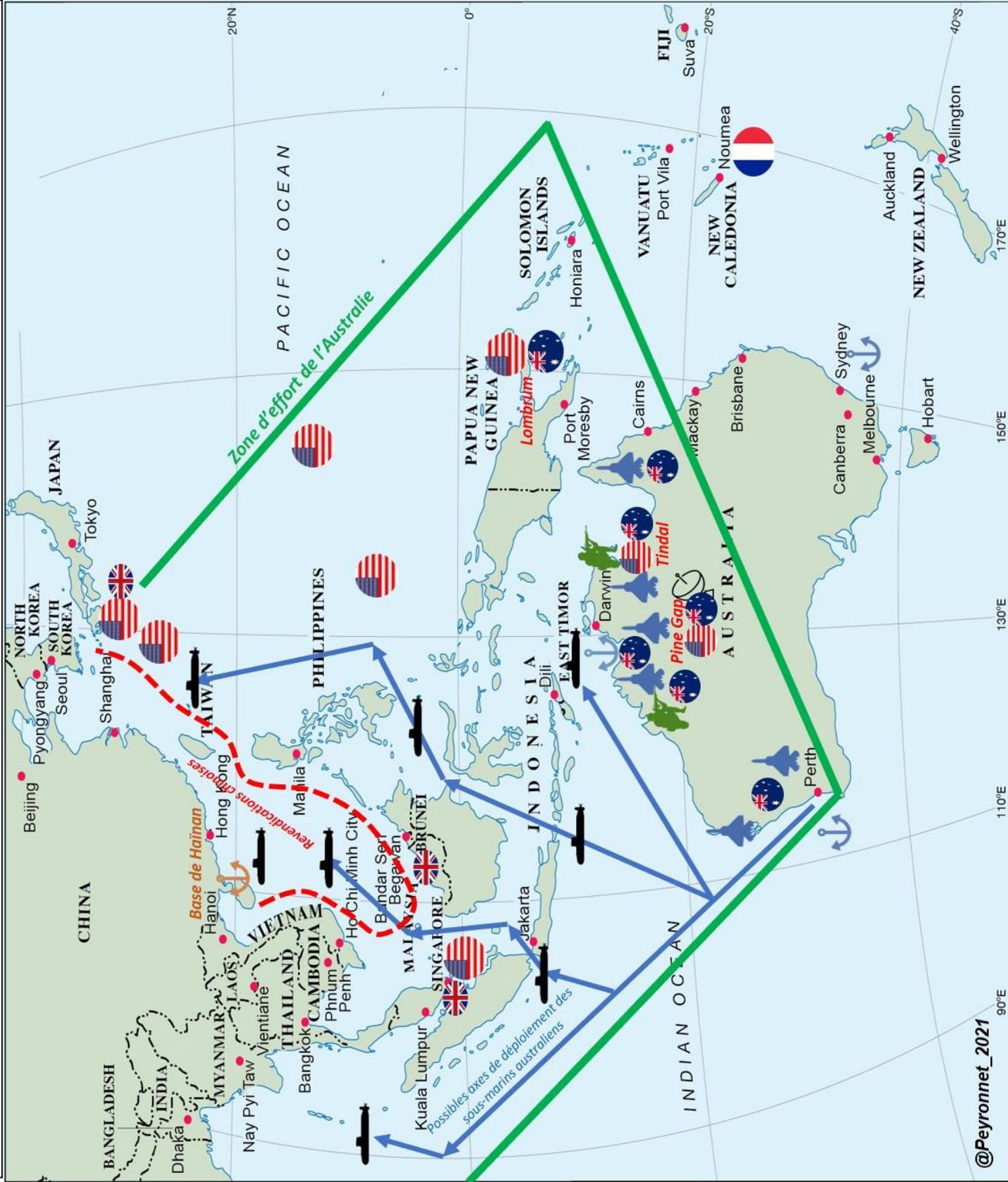
²³ South China Morning Post, 06/10/2021.

²⁴ Something not seen since the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam in the 1970s.

²⁵ Antoine Bondaz, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique (FRS), *Le Monde* 17/09/2021.

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Possible operating areas for Australian submarines / Main Australian strategic lines of effort





FMES

Fondation Méditerranéenne
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INSTITUT FMES

Maison du Numérique et de l'Innovation
Place Georges Pompidou - F 83000 TOULON

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