



IN A NUTSHELL

Dr. Stormy-Annika Mildner, Lennart Nientit

AUKUS: A New Alliance for the Indo-Pacific. And where is the EU?

December 2021

During a joint virtual press conference on September 15th, 2021, the heads of government of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia announced the establishment of a new military alliance in the Indo-Pacific. The AUKUS group – an acronym for Australia, United Kingdom, United States – has caused considerable international stir, and not only because of the strong French reaction. China countered with sharp criticism towards the new coalition, calling it a product of a “Cold War mindset”. Although neither side has specifically mentioned China, the new alliance is to limit the expansionist foreign policy of the People’s Republic, to create a strategic counterweight in the Indo-Pacific, and to strengthen relationships with other stakeholders in the region. This was underlined at the UN General Assembly in New York, when U.S. President Biden not only met with Prime Minister Morrison and Prime Minister Johnson, but also with the representatives of Japan and India.

By forming the alliance, the three countries are seeking to improve their cooperation in three specific areas. Firstly, the United States and the United Kingdom are assisting Australia with the development and deployment of nuclear-powered submarines over the next 18 months. This is noteworthy because of two aspects: At the time the new alliance was announced, the French Naval Group was close to signing a contract to sell twelve conventional submarines to Australia. The failure of this billion-dollar deal caused indignation in France and led to the temporary recall of the French ambassadors from the United States and Australia. The cooperation also represents a novelty in U.S. security policy. Tradi-

tionally, top-secret nuclear submarine technology has been shared only with the UK. Until now, other allies have been excluded from this technology sharing.

The second goal of the alliance is to improve information sharing in key technological areas such as artificial intelligence, cyber and quantum systems, underwater systems, and long-range strike weapons. In doing so, however, AUKUS does not intend to compete with already existing alliances.

Thirdly, the alliance aims at increasing the use of military bases in Australia by U.S. troops. Possibilities include an increase in the number of U.S. troops stationed in Darwin, more joint military exercises with U.S. and other regional partners, and more bases and equipment storage in Australia. The agreement could also include the deployment of U.S. Virginia-class nuclear submarines from Perth.

In France, the new alliance is considered an affront. Not only has the country suffered significant financial losses as a result of the AUKUS submarine deal but France has always regarded itself as a significant actor in the region because of its numerous Pacific territories. Germany has demonstratively backed its closest ally France, and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Joseph Borell spoke of AUKUS being a “disappointment” for the European Union. However, the EU’s criticism is mainly directed at the way the new alliance was created and announced, rather than its strategic implications.

Some have criticized that AUKUS is in direct competition with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. It should be noted, however, that there are already regional alliances in the region that have existed alongside NATO for years. These are, for example, the 5-Eyes Group (between Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and the United Kingdom) in which intelligence information is shared, or the QUAD Group in which Japan, Australia, the United States, and India coordinate activities in the region. None of these groups has ever come close to NATO's role and strategic importance. This also applies to the AUKUS Group, which is in its theoretical conception by no means comparable to NATO.

At this point, there is no reasonable concern that AUKUS will fundamentally alter the Western security architecture by massively expanding its strategic importance. However, the geopolitical reality behind this development, the growing strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific, as well as the increasingly expansionist Chinese foreign policy in the region must be acknowledged. It must also be recognized that the military capacity and ca-

pabilities of European nations are limited in the Indo-Pacific.

Furthermore, Washington depends on its European allies to watch its back in other strategically important regions while it tries to contain Chinese power politics. This means that Europe, and most notably Germany, have to fill the power vacuum created by the U.S. Withdrawal in its neighborhood through its own operationally autonomous engagement.

In ensuring long-lasting peace and an effective containment of China, the littoral states of the region, such as India, Japan, and Australia, play a more central role in ensuring long-lasting peace and an effective containment of China. This raises the question of whether it would be more realistic and effective to create a new basis for transatlantic security cooperation. A division of labor, in which European foreign and security policy would focus more on the European neighborhood, such as the Middle East and Africa, would give the United States the space and capability to create new and effective forms of regional security cooperation with its allies in the Indo-Pacific.

The Authors

In January 2021, **Dr. Stormy-Annika Mildner** became Director of the Aspen Institute Germany in Berlin. From 2014 to 2020, she served as head of the Foreign Economic Policy Department at the Federation of German Industries (BDI).



Lennart Nientit studies the International Bachelor in Political Management at the University of Applied Sciences Bremen and supported the Aspen Institute Germany as a project assistant from August to October 2021.



Dieser Text stellt die persönliche Ansicht der Autor*innen dar. Die Autor*innen sprechen ausdrücklich nicht im Namen der mit ihnen assoziierten Institution.

Über diese Reihe

Mit dem pointierten Meinungsformat *In A Nutshell* verleiht das Aspen Institute Deutschland ausgewählten AutorInnen eine Stimme, um das aktuelle Zeitgeschehen zu kommentieren und zu reflektieren. Das Format dient dem offenen Diskurs zu drängenden gesellschaftlichen und politischen Herausforderungen und Chancen.