



AFTER AUKUS, “PRESENT AT THE CREATION” IN THE 21ST CENTURY

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN

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For more from this author, visit his recent chapter of [Comparative Connections](#).

Announcement of the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) “[enhanced trilateral security partnership](#)” has generated a lot of attention—good and bad. Most has focused on the decision to provide US nuclear propulsion technology for submarines to Australia; it’s a historic move for sure, but it’s only part of the AUKUS agreement. More important still is fitting AUKUS within the larger mosaic of Indo-Pacific security. This could be—should be—the beginning of a deep, structural modernization of regional security architecture, akin to the emergence of the trans-Atlantic community after World War II.

The submarines (and their contracts) have dominated discussion of AUKUS. They’re important—they transform Australia’s undersea capabilities, shift strategic calculations, raise nonproliferation issues, and mark a genuinely historic technology transfer—but the deal is much more than that. It includes munitions, as well as cooperation in other areas: cybersecurity, space, and new technologies like artificial intelligence. The initiative will, the three leaders declared, “foster deeper integration of security and defense-related science, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains. And ... significantly deepen cooperation on a range of security and defense capabilities.”

The following week, President Biden hosted the first in-person Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) leaders’ summit. The four leaders—from the US, Japan, Australia, and India—[reiterated](#) their commitment to “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.”

While attention has focused on Quad’s military dimension—and the exercises are important – this meeting, like the virtual summit in March, devoted its energy to nonmilitary components. The leaders pledged to continue their cooperation in health security, and related vaccine diplomacy, plus climate change and new technologies, as well as in cyberspace, infrastructure development, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Significantly, the emphasis is on the provision of public goods, not merely forging an “anti-China coalition.”

The Quad language echoes the declarations issued after the [G7](#), [US-NATO](#), and [US-EU](#) summits that were held in June. Each noted sharpening geopolitical competition with China and endorsed a wider spectrum of engagement, with emphasis on climate, vaccine diplomacy, and technology, as well as infrastructure development, embodied by the Build Back Better World Initiative. It sure looks like the Biden team has a template that they are using for regional engagement, whatever the forum.

Bilateral alliance modernization efforts are underway as well. After the AUKUS meeting, senior defense and foreign affairs officials held the US-Australia Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN), which [announced](#) a slew of initiatives to enhance force posture cooperation and alliance integration. When completed, they will significantly improve alliance defense and deterrence capabilities.

The US and [Japan](#) and the US and the [ROK](#) held their own “2+2” meetings in the spring. Coming so early into the new US administration, both were designed to reaffirm the governments’ commitment to their respective alliances and a warmup for more systematic modernization efforts that would follow once the Biden administration got its team in place and concluded its policy reviews. Those fine intentions were repeated when the two alliance leaders,

Japanese Prime Minister [Suga Yoshihide](#) and South Korean President [Moon Jae-in](#), met Biden during their respective visits to the White House. (The schedule may be delayed given the change in administration in Tokyo and Korea's national elections next spring.)

The weave is thickening. Alliances are modernizing, allies are developing more robust ties between themselves, and all are beginning to institutionalize ties with nonalliance partners, such as India. Extra-regional powers are increasingly engaged. In addition to its role in AUKUS, the British Royal Navy has [announced](#) that it will station two new patrol vessels in the Indo-Pacific region for “at least the next five years.” As a senior US official explained on background, the deal will “link Europe and particularly Great Britain more closely with our strategic pursuits in the region as a whole.” Several European nations have unveiled Indo-Pacific strategies; the [EU's effort](#) was overshadowed by the AUKUS tempest. Once it gets over its anger at the submarine deal, France will be a factor; it has a genuine regional presence and a real role to play in security affairs.

Geographic expansion is complemented by efforts to broaden cooperation and better compete in geopolitics, evident from the establishment of vaccine, climate and technology working groups in almost every forum, to extensive cooperation on cybersecurity, space, supply chains, and infrastructure development. Martijn Rasser, a technology expert at CNAS, was describing the Quad's efforts but he could have been speaking more generally when he [said](#) they mark “a major step in achieving a comprehensive strategic technology partnership,” adding that “by also emphasizing principles rooted in shared values, the Quad countries are shaping the contours of a new techno-democratic statecraft.”

Together, this will force a rethink of regional defense and deterrence. The US and its partners will acquire new capabilities, which will demand a recalibration of roles and responsibilities. The US-Australia alliance is a model and other institutions will have to change to keep pace. So will the rhetoric. I continue to believe that we should abandon the phrase “extended deterrence” and instead talk about networked, layered, or cooperative deterrence. Whatever the phrase, the concept is the same: the more that deterrence is integrated among allies and

partners, the less it will be “extended.” (As always, this refers only to deterrence broadly; the US will continue to extend its nuclear deterrent.)

There will be difficulties. China is going ballistic: Literally, by [threatening](#) Australia with nuclear attacks, and rhetorically, with blistering [commentary](#). Even more worrisome is the prospect of actions to show that Beijing is not intimidated and to warn other governments that they should not consider emulating Canberra. The record number of Chinese military aircraft that entered Taiwan's air defense identification zone in recent days is one such tactic. Regional tensions may well rise in the interim.

Southeast Asian governments are troubled by that possibility, and some experts, quietly, credit the [observation](#) of Chinese Ambassador to the US Qin Gang that “security affairs of the Asia-Pacific should be jointly decided by people in the region and not dominated by the Anglo-Saxons.” Ironically, the prospect of a new “Caucasian Club” in the region could spur still more for reform, such as expanding the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing arrangement, which would entice Tokyo and Paris.

The organization, coordination, and (perhaps) eventual integration of these many efforts will be difficult. There are many moving parts and the number continues to expand. There is no forum that could begin the task of making sense of it all—and any effort to create one will make China's reaction to AUKUS look like a warmup.

Cumulatively, momentum is gathering for a transformation in Indo-Pacific security. Regional governments are adopting more comprehensive strategies, in which security is being defined more broadly and is drawing in a wider array of actors. A key element is trade, and the US failure to reconsider membership in CPTPP is a huge shortcoming. It is difficult, if not impossible, to predict the eventual outcome, but this moment is rich in opportunity—and risks.

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