



## “JAKUS” AND THE EMERGING CLASH OF ALLIANCES IN THE PACIFIC

BY ARTYOM LUKIN

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When the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) agreement was announced in September, Moscow’s initial response was gloating. In 2015 Paris had reneged on a deal to sell Russia two amphibious Mistral warships and now France itself has been let down by its close allies.

Quickly, however, emotional satisfaction gave way to cold geopolitical calculations, which had little to do with France. On the surface, the military-technological arrangement of the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia is of minor concern to Russia. AUKUS’ area of focus is the Indo-Pacific, whereas Russia’s most vital security interests and geopolitical ambitions are in Europe and the Middle East. In the Pacific, Russia’s strategic posture is defensive and status-quo-oriented.

That doesn’t mean Russia isn’t concerned. The [Russian Pacific Fleet](#) currently has only seven nuclear-powered submarines on active duty, and Australia is expected to receive eight submarines with American and British assistance. Still, no one expects that Russia will need to fight Australian subs, if only because their area of operation would likely be much closer to the South China Sea than the Sea of Okhotsk.

Everyone understands that AUKUS has China in its crosshairs. So, Moscow’s stance on AUKUS is first and foremost determined by Russia’s relationship with China. Mostly because they have a shared foe—

the United States—Moscow and Beijing have been building up a “strategic partnership” since the late 1990s. The Russo-Chinese alignment, as it stands now, has all the features of a quasi-alliance, or entente.

There is little chance that Russia and the United States work out their differences in the foreseeable future, especially given the Ukraine issue. At the same time, a multi-faceted geopolitical and geo-economic rivalry between Beijing and Washington is intensifying. The Moscow-Beijing bond, then, will only get stronger. Russia expects Chinese support in its confrontation with NATO in Eastern Europe. As we will see, based on readouts of official talks and commentary from Chinese state media, Beijing seeks to enlist Moscow as an ally against US-led coalitions in the Indo-Pacific. This is why Moscow opposes AUKUS—and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“Quad”) between the United States, Japan, India, and Australia—even if these arrangements do not pose a direct challenge to Russian security.

Moscow has repeatedly expressed its disapproval of AUKUS, including at the highest level. In a recent public appearance, Vladimir Putin [called](#) it a “closed alliance” whose establishment “leads to more tensions” in “the Pacific zone.” During his videoconference with Xi Jinping on Dec. 15, both leaders denounced AUKUS, as well as the Quad. Putin has also expressed support for Beijing’s “legitimate position on Taiwan-related issues.” According to *Xinhua*’s [account](#) of the Putin-Xi conversation, Russia “will firmly oppose moves by any force to undermine China’s interests using Taiwan-related issues, and moves to form any type of ‘small groups’ in the Asia-Pacific region.” Reciprocating Putin’s understanding of Chinese strategic concerns in the Indo-Pacific, Xi “[supported](#) Russia’s demands” that NATO should stop expanding toward Russian borders.

Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov [referred](#) to AUKUS as a “bloc” and “destabilizing factor,” which may “usher in a new phase of struggle for dominance not only in the Asia-Pacific, but in other regions as well.” Gerasimov also emphasized AUKUS’ potential to proliferate nuclear technology. In another sign of Russian solidarity with China, the Russian envoy at the International Atomic Energy

Agency in Vienna joined his Chinese counterpart in [labeling](#) AUKUS a potential nonproliferation concern. (As an aside, Russia's purism with respect to the nonproliferation dimension of AUKUS may smack of double standards. For decades, since the 1980s, the Soviet Union/Russia has been [leasing](#) nuclear-powered submarines to India and this collaboration program is still active.)

To counter AUKUS, Beijing may expect more from Moscow than rhetorical solidarity. With China bracing for a long-haul rivalry with the United States and its many allies and partners, Beijing will probably attempt to construct its own network of alliances, and Russia will be front and center. In military terms, Russia offers three benefits to China. First, Russia is the most significant external supplier of military technology for the People's Liberation Army (PLA), even as China is becoming increasingly capable of designing and producing most sophisticated weapons. Second, Russia can tie down US forces in the European theater, distracting Washington and weakening its capacity to respond to contingencies in the Western Pacific. Finally, Russia could support China in the Pacific strategic theater in the event of a confrontation, most probably over Taiwan.

It is perhaps only a question of time before a fourth nation, Japan, throws its weight behind AUKUS. *De facto*, it is already there, informally, and a formal linkage may be in the works, despite US officials' [claims](#) to the contrary. Tokyo has consistently signaled that it would not stand aloof in a contingency over Taiwan, and it has been more vocal in recent months.

The emerging "JAUKUS" is primarily a naval partnership. If there is a war between China and JAUKUS countries, it will happen primarily at sea. This is where Russia's assets in the North Pacific would come in handy, and there are signs that Beijing is beginning to see Russia as an important part of China's response to the maritime threats coming from the JAUKUS coalition. Even just a month before AUKUS was announced, the Russian International Affairs Council published an article by Zhao Huasheng, a professor of Fudan University, in which he [proposes](#) to add a maritime dimension to the Sino-

Russian strategic partnership. The article argues that "China and Russia are facing serious security threats from sea, some of which are from the same source. Maritime military cooperation between China and Russia can enhance their respective military defense capabilities and more effectively safeguard their security."

Given the sensitivity of the subject, it is unlikely a senior Chinese scholar published this article without a nod from Beijing. In a Russian-Chinese expert [roundtable](#) in late October, which I attended, there were also calls from the Chinese side for arrangements consisting of states not happy with AUKUS and the Quad.

The maritime domain has been an increasingly important component in Russo-Chinese military cooperation. The most spectacular recent manifestation was a "joint patrol" by Russian and Chinese warships in the Pacific Ocean, in which they nearly circumnavigated Japan. Of note, the [commanding ship](#) of the joint flotilla was the Chinese newest destroyer Nanchang. Beijing's *Global Times* [said](#) the Sino-Russian naval demonstration was "a warning to Japan as well as the US, which have been rallying allies to confront China and Russia, destabilizing the region."

The North Pacific is the most logical theater to operationalize a Moscow-Beijing military axis. Russia and China have a direct presence in the region, where they maintain substantial military capabilities, which can complement each other. It is also in the North Pacific that Russia and China directly interact with a [shared adversary](#)—the United States and its junior ally Japan. Last June, Russia held massive military drills in its Far East and adjacent waters. The exercise [simulated](#) "a standoff of two coalitions of states," even though the composition of antagonistic coalitions was not revealed.

Russia's naval capabilities in the Pacific are limited, with the Russian Pacific Fleet being essentially a green-water navy. Still, Russia can provide a range of force multiplier functions to the Chinese in the event of a new Pacific War. For example, Chinese submarines can use Russia's Pacific littoral zone, especially the Sea of Okhotsk, as a sanctuary. In

recent years, Russia has been building its coastal defenses in the Pacific, paying [special attention](#) to the Kuril Islands that guard the entrance into the Sea of Okhotsk. The prospect of China getting basing rights on the Russian Pacific Coast, perhaps in Kamchatka, also no longer looks out of question. When a conflict over Taiwan erupts and the United States and Japan intervene militarily, China might rely on Russia to launch a counterattack against Alaska and the Japanese Islands.

One might ask about Russia's motivation to get drawn into a Pacific war between China and JAUkus, especially given that such a war could easily escalate? The simple answer is that Moscow has no choice. If the Ukraine crisis escalates and the West imposes massive sanctions on Russia, Moscow will turn to China for an economic lifeline. Chinese help is unlikely to come free of charge. In return, Russia might be asked to accommodate Beijing's military requests in the Pacific.

North Korea is another strategic player in the North Pacific whose geo-economic dependence on China, along with its avowed anti-Americanism, makes it a suitable candidate for a Sino-centric alliance network.

Over the next few years, a "RUCNDPRK" partnership could become a counterbalance to JAUkus.

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