

Is AUKUS really an ‘alliance’?

Since the unanticipated announcement of the ‘AUKUS’ initiative at a summit meeting between Australia’s Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his British and American counterparts in September 2021, controversy about its role and significance has continued largely unabated. The Australia-UK-US agreement now features saliently in Indo-Pacific security debates and appears to have become an instant fixture of the region’s, sometimes bewildering, array of institutional architecture.

Yet questions remain as to its exact nature and purpose, and what it means for Australia and the Indo-Pacific. At the time of its appearance, and subsequently, media commentators have portrayed it as a new ‘alliance’ (or ‘defence pact’). Even some security analysts have employed similar terminology, describing it as ‘a new trilateral military and political alliance’, though most have been more circumspect in their language. From this position, it was a short step to alluding to an ‘Asian NATO’.

Such estimations, if taken a face value, would have a potentially transformative effect on the Indo-Pacific security outlook. Consider how the regional security landscapes of Europe and Asia were permanently reconfigured in the aftermath of World War II by NATO and the American (‘hub-and-spoke’) bilateral alliance frameworks, respectively.

But, as I argue here, *prima facie*, these initial denominations do not stand up to closer scrutiny and somewhat overstate its significance through the use of hyperbole. Thus, it’s worthwhile taking stock, half a year out from its inception, to reflect more closely on what AUKUS actually is or isn’t. This is not quite as simple as it might seem.

To expedite this, as an International Relations scholar and security analyst, I will make a *de jure* negative case, followed by a more positive *de facto* case, to determine the two different ‘faces’ AUKUS presents. Having advanced these somewhat contrasting cases, I will then contemplate the broader implications of AUKUS for Australia and the region, before concluding.

The *negative* case: AUKUS is *not* (technically) an ‘alliance’

Technically-speaking AUKUS is not a *de jure* military alliance. ‘Alliances’, as predominantly understood by experts, are narrowly defined as a formal association of states for the use (or non-use) of military force, in specified circumstances, against states outside their own membership. Moreover, the essential element of any genuine alliance is a treaty instrument committing the parties to mutual military aid in the event of attack by an external power. Such treaties are often, somewhat confusingly, termed ‘defence pacts’ (though not all defence pacts actually constitute treaty-based military alliances). Notwithstanding, AUKUS contains no such direct provision and therefore fails to qualify as an *alliance* on those grounds. The NATO treaty, with its unequivocal Article V provision for collective defence, is the benchmark in these respects.

If it’s not genuinely an alliance, then how should we accurately characterise the AUKUS arrangement? While some analysts have touched on this point, few have squarely addressed what the arrangement precisely represents.

First, let’s look at the terminology literally used during its announcement. In a joint press release it was characterised by PM Morrison as an ‘enhanced trilateral security partnership’, by PM Boris Johnson as a ‘new trilateral defense partnership’ and President Joe Biden as a ‘new phase of the trilateral security cooperation’. These differing terms obviously allow room for divergent interpretations, but nowhere do they employ the phrase ‘alliance’ (or ‘treaty’). What they clearly signal is joint intent on matters of security and defence coordination in the Indo-Pacific arena, not the formation of a trilateral treaty alliance or Asian NATO.

Second, given that the attendant submarine deal featured so prominently in the announcement of AUKUS, **is it possible that ‘defence pact’** be simply read as an ‘arms deal’? It is important to note that the Anglo-American commitment to assist Australia in the development of nuclear-powered submarines is the ‘first major initiative’ of AUKUS. This is part of a broader program of ‘deeper integration of security and defense-related science, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains.’ This signifies the creation of a wide and deep defence-technological relationship, so perhaps a ‘defence-technological pact’ may be an apt way to describe it. But arms deals do not by themselves portend alliances either, though they often appear as part of them.

These are the material facts and the exact terminology employed by the instigators of AUKUS. By these lights, it simply does not constitute an 'alliance' in the *de jure* sense of the term.

The *positive* case: Or is it a 'virtual alliance'?

Having rejected the injudicious employment of the term 'alliance' by some of the commentariat above, I will now make their case for them, but based upon different grounds than a simple mischaracterisation of the AUKUS announcement.

To make a positive case that AUKUS a *de facto* if not *de jure* alliance requires broader contextualisation of the arrangement, much of it based upon inference. This of course requires that we suspend narrow specialist definitions of alliance to admit the role of perceptions and expectations, rather than relying on legal documentation.

Australia the UK and the US are already extraordinarily close security partners. Both Australia, through ANZUS, and the UK, through joint membership of NATO, are already treaty allies of the United States (but not with each other). As such, their strategic thinking, military interoperability and commitment to their American ally are already at a high pitch. This has been built on decades of alliance cooperation and their joint participation in conflicts ranging from World War II, through to the 1991 Gulf War, to coalitions in Afghanistan and Iraq. They are also deeply connected through the 'Five Eyes' intelligence sharing agreement (along with Canada and New Zealand). Further reinforcing their practical commitment and experience is their ideological alignment. The US, UK and Australia are seen as the champions of what they refer to as the 'rules-based' liberal world order and upholders of democracy and human rights. Thus, when PM Morrison speaks of a 'forever partnership', this is no idle rhetoric.

Hence, when we take these significant factors into account, the verdict of whether the AUKUS agreement might be called an 'alliance', more broadly speaking, potentially alters. Perhaps the terminology of 'virtual alliance' may be relevant? That the values and interests of the three parties are so closely aligned and built upon shared heritage and military sacrifice certainly lends the compact a strategic and 'familial' intimacy that many actual treaty alliances have lacked. AUKUS is a new mechanism that exemplifies this pre-existing condition going forward. In such an exceptional case, with deep expectations of mutual support present, the expression

of commitment through a treaty document may be rendered superfluous. There is ample precedent to make such a case, if one looks at say the US-UK or US-Israel 'special relationships', there is wide consensus that these represent *de facto alliances*, yet they do not conform to the strict *de jure* criteria expressed above.

How does AUKUS fit into Australia's evolving regional alignment posture?

In light of the Janus-like nature of AUKUS as a non-alliance or *de facto* 'virtual alliance', it is worthwhile briefly examining just how the new formation fits into Australia's strategic alignment posture in the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS is representative of a broad spectrum of different forms of security alignment, or security cooperation, that include self-styled 'security communities' such as ASEAN, or 'Strategic Partnerships' such as Sino-Russian relationship. It must be remembered that a *de jure* military alliance is the *ultimate* security commitment between nations, and one highly provocative to excluded parties. Not every alignment of security/defence interests will necessitate the promulgation of a formal alliance treaty to achieve its aims.

Following from this, AUKUS as a 'non-alliance' form of security alignment is also representative of a new trend in Australian foreign policy towards 'minilateralism'. With the Australia-US-Japan-India 'Quad' grouping setting a precedent, AUKUS adds to Canberra's minilateral repertoire. These minilaterals allow for targeted security cooperation between a small number of like-minded countries based upon a confluence of shared values and interests. As in the case of AUKUS, the Quad has also been subject to mischaracterisation as an 'alliance'—following exactly the same pattern—and that is why it is so crucial to examine such configurations with a closer lens.

For Australia, the newly assigned preference to minilaterals such as AUKUS and Quad, among others, are an attempt to leverage such forums to extend its middle power reach in the absence of competitive national capabilities (and with which AUKUS will assist). Moreover, these minilaterals also serve to plug the gap between the *exclusive* ANZUS alliance and *inclusive* pan-regional security dialogue forums such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in which Canberra actively participates, thus providing another 'layer' to regional security architecture.

PM Morrison has invested a lot in AUKUS and incurred stringent criticism both domestically and regionally. In essence, the government views AUKUS as a way of responding to a deteriorating security environment in the Indo-Pacific. In this view, the submarine and technology components of AUKUS, combined with the perceived expectation of enhanced Anglo-American support for Australia's security interests, are worth the price to be paid for antagonising China and unsettling some of the country's Southeast Asian neighbours. But aligning more closely with traditional 'Anglosphere' partners such as the UK and the US by no means precludes cooperative 'Asian engagement'. It must be remembered that Australia is a key member of the Quad, alongside Japan and India, and has strategic partnerships with both these countries, as well as a spectrum of other regional states. Indeed, another minilateral—the Five Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA) —includes Australia, the UK and New Zealand, alongside Malaysia and Singapore. For a middle power like Australia security must be sought through all forms of cooperation and through all manner of groupings.

Conclusions

AUKUS could be characterised as a mix of 'traditional partners' and 'new methods'. That is, it solidifies security relations with established 'Anglosphere' confederates, whilst adopting a very contemporary 'non-alliance' mechanism through which to orchestrate and implement collaboration.

Whether AUKUS constitutes a de facto 'virtual alliance' is an important distinction, but one that should not occlude the important point that it serves as another minilateral mechanism, alongside the Quad and others, that contribute to national security strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

Whether bona fide alliances are a fading pillar of Cold War statecraft or whether existing ones are resurgent in response to rising challenges in Europe and Asia, does not alter the fact that not all security arrangements must be codified as such. No new alliances have appeared since 1960. Calling AUKUS an 'alliance' in everyday parlance is understandable, especially in the media, but as I have argued, we need to be circumspect when blithely applying the term to every occurrence of security cooperation. This may be a reflection of the fact that we have yet to fully embrace the complexity of the regional institutional architecture characterised by the appearance of unfamiliar minilaterals and strategic partnerships that do not conform to the dominant alliance paradigm.

Image: A still from a televised statement on AUKUS by US President Joe Biden and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, September 2021. Credit: 10 Downing St/YouTube.