Opinion **Asia maritime tensions**

Aukus, the Anglosphere and the return of great power rivalry

The US, the UK and Australia believe that preparing for a war with China may be the best way of preventing one

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When an American president and a British prime minister stand side by side on a warship, it is hard to avoid the historical echoes. In August 1941, Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill met off the coast of Newfoundland to sign the Atlantic Charter, setting out a joint vision for a postwar world.

The Pacific is the site for Monday's summit between Joe Biden, Rishi Sunak and Anthony Albanese. The leaders of the US, UK and Australia were due to meet on board the USS Missouri to spell out the Aukus accord, an arms and technology deal centred on supplying nuclear-powered submarines to Australia.

Aukus is not a grand philosophical statement like the Atlantic Charter. But the underlying geopolitical intent is clear. The nations of the "Anglosphere" are renewing their alliance — this time to counter China's efforts to gain naval dominance in the Pacific.

While Aukus has its roots in 20th-century history, it is not obviously a partnership made for the 21st century. Britain is no longer an imperial power with Pacific colonies and bases. Australia's economic ties are now primarily with Asia; China is its largest trading partner.

As for the Americans, Australia and Britain seem, in some ways, odd choices for what

The Washington Post calls potentially "the most consequential trilateral defense technology partnership in modern history". America has military bases in Japan and South Korea that are far closer to the Chinese mainland.

The Aukus deal has already provoked plenty of controversy. It involved Australia repudiating a previous submarine deal with France — a decision that so infuriated the French that they briefly withdrew their ambassadors from Washington and Canberra.

In Australia, some wonder if their government has truly grasped the expense, time and technological demands of getting so deeply involved in nuclear technology. In the UK, sceptics in the military establishment believe that the "Indo-Pacific tilt" will stretch Britain's military too thin and divert resources from the Russian threat. In America, parts of the government are digging in their heels against sharing some of the country's most closely guarded technological secrets.

Some strategists argue that the deal is contributing to a dangerous rise in military tensions with China. Sam Roggeveen of Australia's Lowy Institute think-tank has questioned why Australia is "buying a weapon expressly designed to hem China's navy in along its coastline and strike targets deep inside Chinese territory . . . Australians should be asking themselves: is this really who we are?"

Despite these concerns, the Aukus pact enjoys bipartisan support in all three countries. Australia's governing Labor party, like the Liberals who negotiated the pact, regards Aukus as a necessary response to a decades-long military build-up by China that has provided Beijing with the largest navy in the world. Like the Americans, the Australians are concerned by a pattern of aggressive Chinese behaviour — including the building of military bases in the South China Sea, deadly clashes with the Indian army and, above all, increasing belligerence towards Taiwan.

For the designers of Aukus, the purpose of the pact is not to wage a war but to prevent one. It is justified as a classic act of deterrence, intended to dissuade China from deploying its military muscle against Taiwan or in the South China Sea. They believe that the west's failure to respond forcefully earlier encouraged China to keep pushing. As one senior Australian official puts it: "Weakness is provocative."

Arthur Sinodinos, Australia's ambassador to Washington, has described Aukus as a "moonshot". Like the original moonshot, it requires an act of faith that — with sufficient determination and national will — technological and economic problems can be overcome.

As tensions rise with China and Russia, all three Aukus countries see a merit in

tightening what is already a very close security and intelligence relationship. The Americans see China as the biggest geopolitical and security challenge they face — and understand that they need allies to counter Chinese power. In Washington, Aukus is seen as a demonstration of US determination not to back away from the Indo-Pacific. One senior official even defends the way France was treated as a useful demonstration of American "ruthlessness".

Australians know that, throughout their nation's history, a friendly power — first Britain, then America — has ensured the openness of the oceans to their north. The idea that one day these oceans might be dominated by an authoritarian China deeply unsettles Canberra, particularly given the recent sharp deterioration in Sino-Australian relations. Binding the Americans into a tighter security relationship is seen as an important guarantee for the future.

As for the British, they argue that the security of Europe is "indivisible" from the security of the Indo-Pacific, particularly given the increasingly close relationship between Russia and China. For a Conservative government that is still trying to make sense of Brexit, Aukus is also a useful symbol that "Global Britain" can be something more than an empty slogan.

The mood on board the USS Missouri is likely to be celebratory. But the underlying reality is grim. The US, the UK and Australia, having fought on the same side in two world wars, are again preparing for a possible global conflict.

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