

# **AUKUS - how the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific changes**

**by**

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The concept of Indo-Pacific is relatively new, it refers to the marine region comprising the tropical and subtropical parts of the Indian and Pacific Oceans where the states bordering it have in common economic, political and strategic interests.

In reality, Indo-Pacific is a political term, not a geographical one, and its perimeter changes according to strategic objectives: for the USA the area extends from Hawaii to India while for Japan it reaches the eastern African coasts. The two main aspects that characterize the growing interest in this area concern the positive rate of economic growth of regional states and the rise of China as a regional power.

Last September it was announced the agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States known as AUKUS, from the initials of the names of the countries in English, which provides for the sharing of military technology, intelligence, capabilities in artificial intelligence but above all the supply of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia.

This is despite the fact that France and Australia had signed, in 2016, a contract worth 56 billion euros for 12 conventional submarines, which would have been built by the French Naval Group in the oceanic country.



The agreement has raised unease among the international allies of the United States and not only within a European Union marginalized by the agreement. If France, which lost a contract to renew Canberra's submarines, protested against what appears to be a return to America First, in the Asian region itself New Zealand remained cold.

The new anti-China strategic alliance between the United States, Britain and Australia has not only cancelled contracts between Canberra and Paris on submarine production, but is cracking relations between Brussels and Washington. It can be said that a clear and strong signal has come from Washington, at the cost of collapsing the revenues of a company of an allied country, there is no backtracking on national strategic commitments.

As for Australia, it has badly digested the Chinese expansionism of the Xi era, which by crossing the first chain of islands that circumscribes the South China Sea (Japan, Philippines, Taiwan and Indonesia), has entered the traditional Australian sphere of influence. In 2018, after criticizing China's penetration into its political system, Canberra banned Huawei and ZTE from developing the national 5G network and also criticized the People's Republic over the violent process of assimilation of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and repression in Hong Kong. It therefore seems logical that Australia has tried to strengthen its ties with the United States, by far the most powerful ally, to counter Beijing's hegemony in Asia and also the only one truly able to increase its military arsenal.

It should be noted that Australia has long considered it essential to counterbalance the Chinese advance in the area. This position stems not only from a continuous expansion of Beijing's military forces, but also from the moves of the People's Republic throughout the Indo-Pacific region and therefore believes that the only brake on this epochal change, namely the birth of a Chinese maritime power, is to tighten ties with the Anglosphere.<sup>1</sup>

For Australia Beijing is a very important trading partner, a third of its exports are directed to China but from the point of view of security Canberra is aligned with the United States for belonging to the Anglosphere and also because it is one of the countries of the Five Eyes<sup>2</sup>.

The Indo-Pacific area now represents an important part of the planetary geopolitical balance, for the economic, diplomatic, strategic and military interests that affect the countries bordering the large mass of water surrounding the Asian continent. In this area the interests of the two greatest planetary powers, China and the United States, meet, confront and collide and this overlaps at the same time with the geopolitical projection of leading actors such as India and Russia, the progressive revival of Japan's activism in the international context and the growing strategic dynamism of nations with a relevant

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<sup>1</sup> English-speaking nations that have close political, military and diplomatic cooperation with the United Kingdom

<sup>2</sup> Intelligence alliance that includes Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States

economy interested in making their voices heard: South Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore and Taiwan.



The announcement of a trilateral agreement between the US, Australia and the United Kingdom opens in the Indo-Pacific a new front of containment in an implicitly anti-Chinese key with the Chinese Navy that is growing in size and capacity, completely transforming but, at the same time, highlights another serious problem that concerns European countries, members of the Union and NATO. It must also be considered that, except for the three countries involved, no one knew anything about that agreement in fact it was kept hidden as if the rest of the world were on the side of Beijing which instead represents the capital of a solitary empire. The head of diplomacy and defense of the Union, Josep Borrell, referring to AUKUS admitted that he was not aware of it adding "and I assume that an agreement of that nature was not put together in the space of one night".

Apart from Beijing's punctual criticism, France's decision to recall its ambassadors from Washington and Canberra following this agreement caused a sensation. For France, as pointed out in a note by the Minister of Foreign affairs French, Jean Yves Le Drian, "the abandonment of the ocean-class submarine project that had linked Australia to France since 2016, and the announcement of a new partnership with the United States aimed at launching studies on possible future cooperation on nuclear-powered submarines constitute unacceptable behavior between allies and partners, the consequences of which concern our very conception of alliances, our partnerships and the importance of the Indo-Pacific for Europe."

For the United Kingdom it is clear the interest in entering the area, as part of the "Global Britain", with the choice to bring back to the center of foreign policy the area east of the Suez Canal, thus reaffirming the centrality of the region.

As for the United States, its foreign policy, also in light of the continuous Chinese expansionism, is concentrated in the Indo-Pacific area not only using power projection but with the expansion of alliances to be enlarged and all this at the expense of the Euro-American bond. Already in 2011 there was the announcement of the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of the "Pivot to Asia" which represented the great element of novelty of US foreign policy of the new century. In practice, it represented the re-orientation of the country's strategic axis towards the Asia-Pacific region, which initially envisaged the strengthening by 2020 of the economic, diplomatic and military presence of the United States in one of the most important strategic theaters, dominated by the gradual rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

India, which in the Indo-Pacific represents a central element for any agreement, is opposed to any military alliance and wants to keep itself in balance between the United States and Russia also considering that the latter at the moment represents the main supplier of armaments. Strengthened by its membership in the Non-Aligned Movement, India has not formed formal alliances with either russians or Americans, which has favored the propensity to entertain, unlike China, a broad cooperation with the West. In any case, the friction between the US and China for India remains dangerous given that, after China, the US is the first trading partner and that China is the holder, for India itself, of the highest trade deficit.

India, on the other hand, wants to directly control its ocean which, despite its geographical name, is currently under American control due to bases in Kuwait, Djibouti, Bahrain, Oman and Singapore from which they monitor access to the main straits. In any case, although there is currently no real possibility of transforming ties into binding alliances with Western democracies, sooner or later India is destined to become part of the ranks of countries with stable anti-Chinese relations with the USA, it is no longer possible to isolate itself by following a third way.

The EU at the moment does not seem to have a clear and common policy and beyond the French grievances and the hitherto very vague collective ambitions of strategic autonomy, it has witnessed inert an agreement that in fact has not only canceled a contract between Australia and an EU member country but has also shown the lack of consideration of the United States towards European partners. The EU's Indo-Pacific strategy, announced

on the same day as the agreement between the three states of the Anglosphere, is extremely weak and not very incisive compared to the one proposed by Washington which certainly does not want hesitation on the part of Brussels and EU member states.<sup>3</sup> There is a lack of a necessary and today still insufficient effective cohesion (not only rhetorical) between the major eu member countries, in fact it is not very credible to announce global objectives or military commitments without having explained what are the collective interests to be defended, renouncing where necessary a certain margin of national sovereignty.

Moscow, which wants to play the role of the geopolitical balance focused on the dream of greater Eurasia, far from the West, increasingly close to Beijing, and with India part of the US-led anti-Chinese system, said it was "worried" about the trilateral security alliance that binds Australia, the UK and the United States. According to Moscow, the pact threatens global efforts for nuclear non-proliferation because it will allow Australia to become the second country after the UK to have access to US nuclear technology to produce nuclear-powered submarines.

On October 1, the Federation's Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergey Ryabkov, speaking at a public discussion at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, said: "We are concerned about the recent announcement by the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia on the development of a technologically advanced system of partnership that will allow Australia to enter the ranking of the top five countries in the world in this type of armaments." The Russian deputy minister also noted that the agreement, allowing Canberra to build a fleet of nuclear submarines, represents a "challenge to the international nuclear non-proliferation regime".

As for China, for years it has been expanding its political, economic and military influence in the world, with the intention of taking advantage of territorial resources and aligning states in its favor and the Indo-Pacific represents one of the main spheres of Chinese interest.

China seeks to monopolize this macro region with the construction of ports, infrastructure and military bases and is expanding its economic influence, so much so that it wants to enter the Trans-Pacific pact<sup>4</sup>. This quest for territorial and maritime control

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<sup>3</sup> On 19 April 2021, the Council of the European Union (EU) endorsed conclusions on an EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Region

<sup>4</sup> Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) free trade agreement of the Asia-Pacific region, which counts among its signatories 12 countries, of which 7 states of the Asian continent (Australia, Brunei, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, Vietnam) and 5 of the American continent (Canada, Chile, Mexico, Peru, United States).

clashes with U.S. and Western interests, whose presence in the South China Sea is seen as "destabilizing" by the Beijing government.

In recent years, between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, there has been the consolidation of the maritime concept and the simultaneous increase of the Asian political weight and this has led to an overlap of political-economic-military interests, which has redefined balances of power and balance of power as already mentioned also caused by the regional and global ambitions of China, the state actor most credited with contending for the leadership role of the United States.