



## **The importance of American military might to Australia and the Asia-Pacific**

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The security pact (Aukus) between the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia is indeed intended to help counter China in the Asia-Pacific, as acknowledged by the UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace who stated that “Our partners in those regions want to be able to stand their own ground” with China “embarking on one of the biggest military spends in history”.

Australia is not alone with its need for US military support as many nations are increasingly wary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which openly expresses its nationalist desire to dominate the international economy.

While we will have to wait and see how events play out, and whether or not the West (and allies) can temper the influence of the CCP, it is increasingly evident that the world will divide between nations aligned to Western or authoritarian powers.

Whatever the case, the Western led world will require immense military might for a very long time.

Many nations, knowing the obvious link between economic and military security, are supporting US to some degree on the basis that the US is much more committed to a multilateral rule-based world order.

During June 2021, the G7 group of major economies criticised China for alleged human rights abuses and demanded a transparent investigation of the origins of Covid-19 in the country.

A week later, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), on the same day that China had sent an unprecedented 28 air force jets into Taiwan's air defence zone, expressed similar concern by noting "China's frequent lack of transparency and use of disinformation"; the growing military capabilities of China, which it sees as a threat to the security and democratic values of its members; and China's activities in Africa, which includes China having a military base in Djibouti.

All nations eager to promote a multilateral world order, even if they have their own grievances with the US or each other, as France now does with Australia reneging on a submarine deal in favour of the US, will have to run the risk of annoying China.

This will mean that the European powers may also spend more of their defence budgets addressing the issue of China with 11 NATO members meeting the 2 per cent of GDP threshold in 2020 after just three members did so in 2014.

Following on from 2021 visits from Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Canada, India also announced in August 2021 that it too intended to send warships through the South China Sea and would participate in a number of military exercises, including with the Japanese and Australian navies.

Many Asian countries are well aware of the importance of the US to the region.

With regard to the South China Sea, which hosts around one-third of world shipping travels (over \$4 trillion in trade) and important fisheries and undersea fossil fuel reserves, Chinese claims compete with Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines and Indonesia.

To now, the unaccountable CCP spends many billions to discourage dissent against China with its dominance in the South China Sea boosted by 20 constructed islands that host navy and air bases and enable continuous patrols.

With regard to Brunei, where the Sultan virtually decides everything as the Bruneian people accept the Malay Islamic Monarchy as their political system identity, it was reported in August 2021 that China had managed to buy Brunei's silence by injecting \$US6 billion into oil refinery and local infrastructure, "along with promises to boost trade and agricultural cooperation".

During August 2021, after the Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte reversed his threat to cancel the Philippines-United States Visiting Forces Agreement, probably influenced by the military and public backlash after China massed a flotilla of 220 Chinese fishing boats near Philippine-claimed reefs in March 2021, China announced several billions of dollars of assistance to the Philippines to aid railway infrastructure and other projects, in addition to the \$24 billion pledged in 2016.

In September 2021, however, with the Global Times bragging that China now had "the power to dispel or reject a vessel's entry ... if [it] is found to pose a threat to China's national security", many regional nations were already supporting US efforts to counter China's ambition to control the South China Sea.

Indonesia, which has been a long-time member of the non-aligned movement and is a non-claimant in the South China Sea, recently signed a deal with the US to build a coast guard base on the strategically important Batam Island.

While China has sought to bargain over the tract of sea near the 272 tiny Natuna islands northwest of Borneo, with China officially including such waters on a territorial map in 2016, Indonesia during 2018 opened a Natuna Islands military base for up to 1,000 personnel and declared in January 2021 that Indonesian sovereignty “is not negotiable”.

Nevertheless, 63 Chinese vessels in 30 locations spotted within Indonesia’s maritime exclusive economic zone in December 2020.

However, many countries in the Asia-Pacific region still rely on the US and spend little of their own resources on military spending, leading one writer from the CATO Institute to argue in August 2020 that Washington should step back to force Asian countries (especially Japan) to pay more for their defence spending given that China poses an even bigger threat to its nearby neighbours than the US itself.

As a percentage of GDP, while the US level of military spending was 3.7 in 2020, Australia’s was 2.1, Canada 1.4, Indonesia 0.9, Japan 1.0, Malaysia 1.1, New Zealand 1.5, the Philippines 1.0, Singapore 3.2, South Korea 2.8, Thailand 1.5 and Vietnam 2.3.

As it stands, such nations benefit from the US expanding its Pacific presence to counter China, aided by the US’s defence spending since 2014 still being around 3-4 per cent of GDP, albeit lower than the 4-4.9 per cent range from 2004 to 2013.

In addition to the US maintaining facilities on Kwajalein and Wake Island with the US having some 375,000 military and civilian personnel working across the Asian Pacific, the US Indo-Pacific Command and the Federated States of Micronesia concluded high-level talks with the US military to build a new base on the island nation consisting of more than 600 islands in the Western Pacific, some 3,700 miles from Hawaii.

Earlier in 2021, the Pentagon submitted a \$27 billion plan to Congress to bolster capabilities across the Pacific region over the next six years, including armed ground-based cruise, ballistic, and hypersonic missiles, as well as a plan to add more capable missile defenses and new space-based and terrestrial sensors.

Of course, Western and other nations have to compete with the unaccountable CCP which uses its vast resources to achieve economic aims, an aspect much more difficult for democracies which have to justify any spending to their publics.

Hence, there are many obstacles for Western security aspirations.

In Papua New Guinea, after Major General Toropo described the upgrade of the main naval base (Lombrum) on Manus Island as a positive development at a time when China’s growing presence in the region presented “a challenge”, he was rebuked by Prime Minister James Marape’s

statement that “I do not perceive China as a security threat, but rather as an important development, investment and trade partner with shared values conducted under mutual friendship and understanding”.

PNG’s need for investment is obvious. On Manus, which lost its refugee process centres in late 2019 with the remaining refugees transferred to Port Moresby, about 3,000 locals lost work as a result, thus resulting in “an increase in lawlessness on the island because of frustration that our young people can find jobs”.

With regard to the Philippines, the US, while approving plans in July 2021 to sell the Philippines \$2.6 billion worth of fighter jets, missiles and related equipment, has also been keen to not make more of the Duterte government’s human rights record with regard to the country’s bloody war on illegal drugs, despite the Biden administration declaring human rights a centrepiece of US foreign policy.

With Duterte leaving office in 10 months, which may then lead to a reset of US-Philippine relations, Duterte also said his decision to continue the military arrangement with the US was a “concession” in exchange for the millions of COVID-19 vaccines donated by President Biden in recent months, albeit the Philippines public had also grown skeptical over the efficacy of the Chinese-made Sinovac vaccine.

The same careful balancing act is evident by the US relationship with Indonesia, the country viewed as the de facto leader of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

While the August 2021 meeting between their foreign ministers suggested a “new era of bilateral relations” after much less communication under Trump and US Vice-President Kamala Harris’s July 2021 trip to Southeast Asia not including Indonesia, it is clear that Indonesia’s relative neutral stance towards China and the US is also influenced by favourable investment decisions.

At a time when Indonesia was increasingly concerned about budget overruns in building the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail (under the belt and road plan), and had been pursuing China to finance a greater share of construction costs, the Indonesian policy analyst Thomas Noto Suoneto noted that “The continuation of the infrastructure commitment is really important to the bilateral relationship”, and “If there is a change of commitment [from the US], it would impact Indonesia’s perception of Washington”.

For Australia, its own security depends greatly on its close relationship with the US as Chinese influence moves closer to its border.

On 16 September 2021, the US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, having stated that “Beijing has seen over the past months that Australia will not back down and the threats of economic retaliation and pressure simply will not work”, noted that “the US will not leave Australia alone on the field or, better yet, on the pitch”.

Both Australia and the US indicated much greater cooperation between them with more US troops to rotate through Darwin with extensive cooperation to occur with regard to missile development and enhanced maritime capability.

In the end, Australia is making decisions it believes are necessary to uphold its national interest with the help of its closest allies the US and UK, albeit cooperation with other nations is also important and worth striving for given a shared concern about the rise of the CCP with its increasingly assertive behaviour.

In addition to the US sharing nuclear technology to fuel future submarines, the recent AUKUS trilateral security agreement includes:

“Tomahawk Cruise Missiles, to be fielded on Hobart class destroyers, enabling Australia’s maritime assets to strike land targets at greater distances, with better precision.

Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles (Extended Range), to enable Royal Australian Air Force F/A-18 Hornets and in future, the F-35A Lightning II, to hit targets at a range of 900km.

Long-Range Anti-Ship Missiles (Extended Range) (LRASM) for the F/A-18 Super Hornet.

Continuing collaboration with the United States to develop hypersonic missiles for air capabilities.

Precision strike guided missiles for Australia’s land forces, capable of destroying, neutralising and suppressing diverse targets from over 400km.

Accelerating \$1 billion for a sovereign guided weapons manufacturing enterprise, to enable creation of Australian weapons in country”.

As also noted by Albert Palazzo, director of war studies at the Australian Army Research Centre, given that long-range precision missiles and sensors have swung the balance between the offensive and the defensive in favour of the defender, Australia must also be capable of launching defensive strikes over a vast area covering its northern approaches.

In the end, with China’s growing economic and military influence, it is the US that remains paramount to ensuring stability in the Asia Pacific.

As long as the CCP menace persists and spreads its tentacles, the resistance to such a powerful authoritarian nation will increase in one form or another, and the US effort will be crucial to any national or collective effort now or in the future as the most powerful liberal democracy in the world.