

On Wednesday, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, US President Joe Biden and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson held a news conference via video link to announce a major strategic defense partnership, dubbed "AUKUS." In an indication of the sensitivity and strategic weight attached to the pact, discussions were kept under wraps, with the announcement taking even seasoned military analysts by surprise.

AUKUS represents a significant escalation of the transatlantic strategic tilt to the Indo-Pacific and should bring wider security benefits to the region, including Taiwan.

At the forefront of the trilateral partnership is a bold plan to transfer highly sensitive US and UK-developed advanced nuclear-powered submarine technology, which would enable the Royal Australian Navy to join a select group of nations capable of operating stealthy, long-range nuclear-powered attack submarines.

For now it is unclear what form the technical assistance would take, or when Australia expects to receive the first deliveries, but it seems likely that to reduce risk and save time Canberra will select a proven, off-the-shelf design: either the Astute class hunter-killer submarine, which London's Royal Navy operates, or the Virginia-class attack submarine operated by the US Navy.

The announcement sounds the death knell for the troubled French-led Naval Group consortium, which was to deliver 12 conventionally powered submarines to Australia, but was mired with ballooning cost overruns, questions over the technical viability of the design and significant delays.

Left unstated during the announcement, China was the elephant in the room.

AUKUS promises to be much deeper than a commitment to help dig the Australian government out of a hole over its submarine procurement woes. The partnership reportedly is to establish new channels of information sharing between the three nations and facilitate the joint development of advanced technologies in areas including cybersecurity, artificial intelligence and quantum computing, which should empower Australia to bolster its defense capabilities

AUKUS plan good for region

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and create a powerful regional bulwark to counter an expansionist China.

From Taiwan's perspective, Australia's switch to a nuclear-powered submarine fleet would allow greater mission endurance, allowing it to park its subs in the South China Sea undetected for 77 days, as opposed to 11 days for conventionally powered diesel-electrics, research by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments showed. This would allow the Royal Australian Navy, in coordination with its British, Japanese and US counterparts, to provide a significantly enhanced deterrence against Chinese adventurism and a potent ability to sink Chinese maritime assets should war break out.

Beijing will be spitting nails. Its modus operandi is to pick off countries one by one. Its leaders detest bilateral and multilateral alliances over which it has no control.

Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) only has himself to blame. His impetuous belligerence has forced Australia's hand and boomeranged on him.

However, Taiwan cannot be complacent, regardless of how well the AUKUS news bodes for long-term regional security.

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