

The impact of AUKUS on Taiwan

Written by Ou Wei-chun 歐偉春

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The leaders of the US, Australia, India and Japan met on Sept. 24 in Washington for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, known as “the Quad.” After the conference, they issued a joint statement that contained no reference to China.

However, the following day, huge naval assets from the US, the UK and Australia simultaneously sailed into the South China Sea from four directions, where China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy was conducting drills.

Vietnamese journalist Duan Dang, who specializes in reporting on military affairs, on Sept. 24 started posting updates on Twitter about the situation in the South China Sea and western Pacific.

Dang used open source satellite imagery to show that the British Royal Navy’s HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier strike group had departed from Guam and was transiting through the Bashi Channel from the east. The US Navy’s USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier group had entered the South China Sea via the Strait of Malacca from the south, and the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier group was approaching from Japan’s Okinawa islands in the north. Meanwhile, the Royal Australian Navy’s HMAS Canberra helicopter landing dock had departed Vietnam’s Cam Ranh Bay and entered the sea from a southwesterly direction.

The convergence of three aircraft carrier groups in the South China Sea throws into stark relief the unique geography of the area. If conflict were to break out, controlling the four major military ports that allow access and exit to the sea from the north, south, east and west — Subic Bay in the Philippines, Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, Changi Naval Base in Singapore and the Port of Kaohsiung in Taiwan — would be vital to war strategy. Controlling these ports would also enable the US and its allies to engage in a rapid and limited war by severing the PLA’s strategic supply lines.

Prior to the exercise, the US’ Naval Institute’s Web site on Aug. 30 reported that a sexpartite rapid reaction naval task group, formed from US, UK, Australian, Japanese and Indian naval assets, carried out operational deployments in the Indo-Pacific region that was clearly focused on island capture.

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During an interview with Sky News on Sept. 17, Australian Minister for Defence Peter Dutton observed: “There is a militarization of bases across the region.”

The driving factor behind this militarization is China’s present attitude and intent toward Taiwan.

A 2017 Rand Corp report assessed that of the three major trigger points that could result in a conflict between the US and China, two involved Taiwan. Although there is no military defense treaty between Taiwan and the US, Taiwan is the linchpin of the first island chain. This is the primary reason why PLA aircraft frequently harass Taiwan’s southwestern air defense identification zone.

While the defensive scope of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the US and Japan incorporates waters surrounding the Taiwan Strait, the US military normally only dispatches navy vessels to traverse the South China Sea under “freedom of navigation” operations.

Earlier this year, the US Navy announced that it would re-establish the 1st Fleet. However, until this happens, the defensive burden currently being borne by the US Navy’s 7th Fleet could become greater and the ability of US-Japan joint forces to project power within the East China Sea would be squeezed even further.

The establishment of the AUKUS security alliance between Australia, the UK and the US could have significant implications for peace in the South China Sea. Not only does it dilute the relevance of the older ANZUS alliance between Australia, New Zealand and the US, which did not allow for involvement in the South China Sea, Australia’s future nuclear-powered submarine capability can integrate with US and Japanese naval assets to form a defensive patrol line stretching from the South and East China seas to the Taiwan Strait. This would help to put flesh on the bone of the Quad alliance.

Taiwan’s military and foreign policy establishment once feared that if the PLA were to use force to annex Itu Aba Island (Taiping Island, 太平島), the provisions of the Taiwan Relations Act might not allow Washington to provide military assistance. However, AUKUS should increase Beijing’s misgivings about making any rash moves.

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With the US, UK and Australia's joint carrier group naval maneuvers demonstrating that they are working on the assumption that the South China Sea would be the stage for the next war, the PLA should factor in a much higher strategic cost for any military adventurism.

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Translated by Edward Jones

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