

AUKUS: Nuclear Proliferation?

“The Geopolitical and Trust Implications of the AUKUS Military Partnership” is a captivating scholarly article by Jamal Barnes and Samuel M. Makinda. Published by the renowned Oxford University Press, it targets an audience comprising international relations scholars, policymakers, and anyone interested in understanding the complex geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific region.

Barnes and Makinda intricately dissect the AUKUS agreement’s ramifications on regional alliances, particularly between Australia, France, and the European Union. The article highlights the precarious balance of trust in international relations, focusing on Australia’s unforeseen withdrawal from a submarine deal with France. Their perspectives reveal the West’s apparent hypocrisy when contrasting the AUKUS agreement with past events like India’s ambitions to develop nuclear capabilities in the 1970s.

When contextualized within our course’s broader curriculum, the article compares to our previous readings on USA’s National Security and National Defense Strategy. Through Barnes and Makinda’s lens, we are granted a more nuanced understanding of the strategies and their interplay with the broader geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region, especially when trust, alliances, and international norms are at stake. The text aptly broadens our perspective on the international consequences of national decisions and the complexities of maintaining trust and transparency amidst global alliances.

AUKUS and French/EU Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

The article starts by providing the background of the AUKUS alliance and how it led Australia to cancel a previous submarine contract with France worth A\$90 billion. This abrupt cancellation without prior consultation has soured relations with France and the EU, both of which had been nurturing their strategies for engagement in the Indo-Pacific. France's Indo-Pacific strategy dates back to 2018, and the EU's strategy was revealed in 2021, aiming to be a balanced power in the region and not merely a bystander in USA-China power struggle. Australia's contract with France was more than a business deal; it was a strategic partnership with significant implications for both parties' regional ambitions.

The Concept of Trust in International Relations

The article transitions into a discussion on the role of trust in international relations, pointing out that the topic has recently gained traction. Trust, built on norms and international conventions, is pivotal for the stability and functioning of global society. The article argues that Australia's decision to back out of its deal with France contradicts the norm of "pacta sunt servanda" (agreements must be kept), undermining a 'presumption of trust' in international society.

Breach of Trust and Its Implications

Australia's abrupt withdrawal from the submarine deal has led to considerable mistrust among traditional allies. France and the EU were not consulted or informed in advance, causing a violation of international norms. Malcolm Turnbull, the former Australian prime minister in 2016, had once noted the submarine agreement with France as one that would "further strengthen the long and proud Australia–France defense relationship" and be instrumental for Australia's

defense capability well into the second half of this century. This commercial transaction signed a long-term strategic partnership to bolster security ties between Australia and France in the Indo-Pacific region. This sets a precarious precedent, allowing states to breach international agreements under the guise of ‘national interest.’

Importance of Adherence to Norms

Finally, the article argues for the essential role of upholding international norms. Respecting such norms helps build trust and fosters an environment conducive to global cooperation, especially in a world fraught with cultural and political tensions. The EU, driven by leading members like France, Germany, and the Netherlands, recently outlined its engagement strategy in the Indo-Pacific, emphasizing the need to “solidify and defend the rules-based international order” and to develop and strengthen regional security partnerships. It is a commitment to work collaboratively with countries, understanding that mutual interests in trade and security are intertwined. As witnessed in the submarine deal fallout, breaking trust risks undermining these ideals of cooperation and shared regional responsibilities.

The Hypocrisy of the West Concerning Nuclear Proliferation: The Case of India

The West’s stance on nuclear proliferation often reveals a glaring inconsistency, especially considering India’s case during the volatile 1970s. At the time, India aimed to develop nuclear capabilities to ensure its sovereignty and as a deterrent against regional threats. However, Western powers, primarily United States, were vocal critics of India’s ambitions. They argued that India’s nuclear program would destabilize the region and contribute to global nuclear proliferation.

This position contrasts with the AUKUS agreement, where Australia is expected to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. While not directly analogous to nuclear weapons, the technology still falls within a domain closely guarded due to its potential misuse. The West applies a double standard. While it prohibits or criticizes some nations from acquiring nuclear capabilities, it endorses and even aids its allies in gaining similar technologies, thereby exhibiting a form of geopolitical hypocrisy.

AUKUS & NPT: A Dichotomy Unveiled

The initiation of the AUKUS pact in September 2021 marked a significant geostrategic alignment among Australia, United Kingdom, and United States. Central to this pact is the provision of nuclear-powered naval submarines (SSNs) to Australia, aimed at creating a deterrence against potential Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific theater. However, the alliance has been cast under the spotlight of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), stirring many legal dilemmas, particularly regarding the classification of nuclear materials and their naval uses.

The dichotomy within the NPT, segregating nuclear materials into either nuclear weapons or peaceful nuclear activities, evokes substantial perplexity when juxtaposed against the SSNs under AUKUS. The nebulous space where SSNs reside within the NPT, neither distinctly a weapon nor a peaceful activity, warrants an exploration through the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties interpretive lens. A crucial contemplation emerges on whether SSNs under AUKUS align or deviate from the NPT stipulations. The interpretative excursion through the

Vienna Convention paints a narrative that potentially aligns SSNs with the peaceful activity criterion under the NPT. If validated, this perspective could make AUKUS exempt from certain safeguards, positioning SSNs as a non-proscribed military activity under the NPT framework.

Opposing Graham T. Allison's Viewpoint on Russian Nuclear Leakage

Graham T. Allison's concerns over "loose nukes" in Russia risk simplifying nuclear geopolitics. While he underscores incidents of nuclear material theft from the former Soviet Union, he doesn't fully address the strategic reasons behind Russia's nuclear arsenal. Just as the AUKUS pact gives Australia nuclear-powered submarines to deter Chinese aggression, Russia's nukes were a Cold War safeguard for Soviet sovereignty.

Allison often highlights thefts and trafficking, but many incidents were hoaxes or didn't involve weapons-usable materials. This narrative overshadows the vital role of Russia's nuclear stockpile in geopolitical balance. It's misleading to portray Russia as careless with its nuclear assets, especially when considering its historic role as a nuclear power.

Drawing parallels between thefts from Russia and the Manhattan Project's early stages is an overreach. Similarly, if we follow this line of thinking, the AUKUS pact's transfer of nuclear technology to Australia has its risks. Both scenarios underscore the complexities of nuclear politics and non-proliferation challenges. While Allison views Russia's nukes with skepticism, AUKUS supporters see it as a necessity against China's rise.

While any theft of fissile material is problematic, we must differentiate between real geopolitical issues and sensationalism. Like Australia's role in AUKUS, Russia's nuclear arsenal is strategic, and critiques should be balanced and informed, not driven by fear.

Contrasting AUKUS, NPT, and Loose Nukes

In an epoch where peaceful and military nuclear activities' boundaries become increasingly blurred, reconciling accords like AUKUS with NPT's fundamental ethos escalates in difficulty. The interface of a concerted strategy against loose nukes, as advocated by Allison, against the backcloth of AUKUS evinces a multi-dimensional challenge. The delicate choreography of ensuring global nuclear safety while fostering strategic military partnerships necessitates a nuanced comprehension of existing treaty frameworks and dynamic nuclear geopolitics.

The Sino-IAEA-AUKUS Nexus

Countries like China have deemed AUKUS as skirting the edges of the NPT, articulating concerns at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In a peculiar dance of diplomacy, India utilized its goodwill within the IAEA to thwart China's attempt at passing a resolution against AUKUS. Despite China's assertion that AUKUS violates NPT stipulations, the IAEA expressed satisfaction with the cooperation from US, Australia, and UK concerning nuclear material monitoring. India's deft diplomacy and non-confrontational stance helped avert acrimony and maintained a status quo favorable to AUKUS.

Conclusion

The odyssey of AUKUS amidst the expansive sea of nuclear non-proliferation unfolds a tableau ripe for legal, strategic, and diplomatic scrutiny. As the ghost of loose nukes continues to haunt the global nuclear discourse, the entanglement of AUKUS with the NPT instigates a broader contemplation of nuclear proliferation contours. Traversing this intricately woven labyrinth demands a balanced approach, synergizing the legal scaffolds provided by treaties like the NPT with the tempestuous geopolitics of nuclear diplomacy. The voyage towards global nuclear safety remains fraught with complex geopolitical currents, evoking a continuous need for discerning and adept navigation.

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