

Britain commits to anti-China axis led by US in AUKUS military pact

Robert Stevens**17 September 2021**

The decision by the United States, the UK and Australian to establish the military alliance AUKUS pact is a historic turning point in Britain's foreign policy with major consequences.

The AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States) pact focuses on the Indo-Pacific region targeting China, one of the world's major nuclear powers. Australia will be allowed to share nuclear technology and will be provided with at least eight nuclear-powered submarines. The UK will share contracts to supply the main component for the new submarines with BAE Systems and engine maker Rolls-Royce set to play a major role.

Expressing the rot of bourgeois democracy, all three governments involved are escalating a dangerous militarist agenda without even the pretence of democratic accountability.

There was no public discussion in the US Congress or the parliaments in Britain and Australia. The first that the world heard about AUKUS was on Wednesday, when it was announced in a joint press conference by US President Joe Biden, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

In a conspiracy against the populations of the three countries involved and the working class of the entire world, the plans were hatched behind closed doors over months.

Johnson's Conservative government allocated less than 45 minutes for a "debate" in parliament Thursday to discuss the formation of AUKUS. He began the discussion with an opening statement of less than seven minutes.

Johnson stated, "If there were ever any question about what global Britain's tilt towards the Indo-Pacific would mean in reality, or what capabilities we might offer, this partnership with Australia and the US provides the answer. It amounts to a new pillar of our strategy, demonstrating Britain's generational commitment to the security of the Indo-Pacific and showing exactly how we can help one of our oldest friends to preserve regional stability."

Johnson didn't conceal what was at stake in winning control of what he called the new "geopolitical centre of the world," intervening in the debate to declare, "The whole Indo-Pacific tilt, of which this is a part, is a recognition of the fact that the CPTPP [Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific] area ... is a £9 trillion trade area in which the UK has an

increasing diplomatic and commercial presence."

As brief as the discussion was in parliament, it underscored why Biden, Morrison and Johnson can proceed with their predatory imperialist agenda—they can all count on "opposition" parties that share their aims.

Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer said, "New challenges can emerge and issues in faraway corners of the globe can quickly turn into threats at home, so Labour welcomes increased co-operation with our allies."

"China's assertiveness does pose risks to UK interests in a secure Pacific region, in stable trading environments and in democracy and human rights," he added.

The Labour leader was more overtly hawkish than Johnson, insisting that the turn to the Asia-Pacific must not jeopardise the ongoing the military encirclement of Russia and Britain's strategic interests in Europe and Asia. "In order to protect our security and interests, we also need to look after our broader alliances," he said. "NATO remains our most important strategic alliance. It is also the most successful, having delivered peace and security in Europe for three quarters of a century. Whatever the merits of an Indo-Pacific tilt, maintaining security in Europe must remain our primary objective."

He then asked Johnson to "guarantee that the arrangement will not see resources redirected from Europe and the high north to the Pacific."

Other MPs were anxious not to be seen as any way unpatriotic or out of step. It was left to Johnson's predecessor Theresa May—ruthlessly dispatched from office by Johnson's Brexit wing of the party in 2019—to point to the potentially catastrophic implications of a military confrontation with China

May asked, "What are the implications of this pact for the stance and response the United Kingdom would take should China attempt to invade Taiwan?"

Johnson refused to answer directly, replying that "The United Kingdom remains determined to defend international law..." and this would be the "strong advice we would give to the Government in Beijing."

The dangers of the UK's new course were confirmed the same day by Taiwan, citing a 'severe threat' from China and clearly timed to coincide with the AUKUS announcement,

announcing additional defence spending of £6.28 billion over the next five years, including on new missiles and warships.

May's intervention made clear that shifting away from a decade old policy which has seen the UK massively extend its economic relations with China means entering uncharted territory. The David Cameron-led Tory government (2010-2015) established a "golden era" with China, leading to Beijing investing billions in the UK economy, including in the development of UK nuclear power stations and mobile phone infrastructure. This led to anti-China hawks in the Tory Party, military and security apparatus insisting that Huawei's role must be curtailed.

In 2015, China set up the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to expand operations into less developed countries and to serve as China's equivalent to the World Bank. Britain was the first Western country to pledge its participation.

Speaking for substantial sections of the capitalist class concerned at the implications of upending economic ties with Beijing, Starmer insisted, "We need to deal with those risks, defend our values and defend our interests, but the same [integrated review of foreign and defence policy] also rightly stated that the UK must maintain a commercial relationship with China, and we must work with them on the defining global issues of the day."

How this circle was to be squared, Starmer did not say. But the factional warfare in ruling circles that erupted over leaving the European Union has not disappeared.

Johnson's policy on coming to power was based on alliance with the US and the Trump administration, which had declared the EU a "cartel" and an economic rival. He claimed that this offered the possibility of developing a "global Britain", with access to the US market and investments in China and other expanding markets in the Commonwealth compensating for lost trade with Europe.

This bubble was burst after Trump's election defeat by Biden, with the Democratic Party leader making clear that the price for Britain maintaining a relationship with Washington is to enlist in the US-led trade and military war drive against China.

This has poisoned the UK's already soured relations with Europe.

Britain played a major role in ensuring that Australia scrapped its A\$90bn (£48 billion) submarine deal with France. British Defence Minister Ben Wallace said Thursday that Australia had come to the UK seeking a deal in March and wanted to abandon the French upgrade, and that Johnson, Morrison and Biden had discussed this on the sidelines of the UK-hosted G7 summit in June.

The secret talks put the unprecedented hardening of the UK's position on China in recent months into context. This week Parliament's Speaker, the Labourite Sir Lindsay Hoyle, citing Beijing's ongoing sanctions against seven UK MPs, banned China's ambassador to the UK from entering the parliamentary

estate to speak at a scheduled meeting of the influential all-party parliamentary group on China.

This follows the unprecedented launching in May of the UK's Carrier Strike Group (CSG), led by the HMS Elizabeth aircraft carrier, on a six-month round trip to the Indo-Pacific. That HMS Elizabeth would be sent to the Indo-Pacific, including sailing provocatively into the South China Sea, was decided on last year. But as tensions were ramped up by Washington with China, the CSG was scaled up with substantial US participation. HMS Elizabeth and the CSG also participated in military operations in the Black Sea and Middle East.

Shortly before the CSG left the UK, Tory hardliner Iain Duncan Smith told the *Telegraph*, "I'm pleased the Aircraft Carrier is deploying in the South China Sea, but they need to complete this process by letting the Chinese know that they disapprove of their very aggressive actions against their neighbours by sailing through the Taiwan Strait." He was backed by Tobias Ellwood, chairman of the Defence Select Committee.

Johnson refused to give the go-ahead to sail the Taiwan Strait, but it is now clear, through the formation of AUKUS, he was preparing "aggressive actions" against China on a vastly greater scale with incalculable consequences.

Even as Johnson boasted in the AUKUS debate that military spending was at 2.2 percent of GDP and had rocketed by £24 billion under his premiership, Ellwood said he hoped the prime minister "now recognises that our peacetime defence budget is no longer adequate, and we will soon need to increase it to 3 percent of GDP if we are to contain the threats that now we face."

As with every penny handed to military, the cost of this will be borne by the working class in the destruction of jobs, wages and conditions and the continued evisceration of health care, education and housing provision. Everything now depends on the building of an anti-war movement rooted in the working class and animated by opposition to the source of war, the capitalist system.



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