

# AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Maritime Security in a Changing Climate

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## Introduction

In September 2021, Australia announced a trilateral security partnership with its longstanding Western allies, the United States and the United Kingdom. As the first initiative of this partnership, Australia decided to acquire nuclear-powered submarines from the UK and the US.<sup>1</sup> This initiative prompted a critical reaction from France because it involved the cancellation of the previous arrangement for acquiring conventional submarines from France. More importantly, this declaration was received with reservation by some countries of the Indo-Pacific region because of the involvement of nuclear propulsion.<sup>2</sup>

In response to a contention that the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) partnership is moving Australia to an 'anachronistic Anglosphere', the then Foreign Minister of Australia stated that this partnership 'does not turn our back on Asia'.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the most significant maritime security concern for many Indo-Pacific coastal and island nations, climate change, has not been given any attention in the AUKUS initiative. This article highlights the challenges in Australia's interaction with its Indo-Pacific allies and partners regarding AUKUS in the context of climate change induced maritime insecurity of the countries in the region.

Despite recognising the three partner countries' 'common tradition as maritime democracies',<sup>4</sup> the Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS is entirely silent about the impact of climate change on maritime security. The AUKUS statement also claims that the endeavours under the partnership 'will help sustain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region'.<sup>5</sup> This article is not arguing that non-inclusion of climate change in AUKUS agenda itself is a direct symbol of neglecting climate change induced security issues. However, any initiative for a peaceful and stable Indo-Pacific

1 Prime Minister of Australia, 'Australia to pursue nuclear-powered submarines through new trilateral enhanced security partnership', media statement, 16 September 2021, <<https://www.pm.gov.au/media/australia-pursue-nuclear-powered-submarines-through-new-trilateral-enhanced-security>>.

2 Reuters, "'We are worried': Indonesia and Malaysia express concern over Australia's nuclear submarine plan', *The Guardian*, 19 October 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/19/we-are-worried-indonesia-and-malaysia-express-concern-over-australias-nuclear-submarine-plan>>; S Grant, 'Kiribati President says AUKUS nuclear submarine deal puts Pacific at risk', ABC News, 28 September 2021, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-28/kiribati-president-criticises-australia-defence-submarine-deal/100495894>>; 'Malaysia expresses concern over Australia's nuclear sub deal with US and Britain', Channel News Asia, 18 September 2021, <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/australia-submarine-deal-malaysia-expresses-concern-ismail-sabri-2187331>>.

3 Minister for Foreign Affairs, 'AUKUS does not turn our back on Asia; it is about building our relationships', media release, 27 September 2021, <<https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/news/aukus-does-not-turn-our-back-asia-it-about-building-our-relationships>>.

4 Prime Minister of Australia, 'Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS', media statement, 16 September 2021, <<https://www.pm.gov.au/media/joint-leaders-statement-aukus>>.

5 Ibid.

not addressing the region's climate change induced insecurities is incomplete. Non-inclusion of climate change in the agenda furthers the perception that Australia's foreign policy is increasingly neglecting its neighbours and non-traditional security issues.<sup>6</sup> Australia should acknowledge climate change as a regional security issue and integrate it in AUKUS and other security initiatives to strengthen regional credentials.

### Climate Change and the Indo-Pacific

In 2019, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published a special report painting a gloomy picture of the ocean.<sup>7</sup> The IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate identified many challenges for ocean governance.<sup>8</sup> The report also highlighted that the sea level rise might present 'a security risk', including the risk of forced 'displacement and migration of people'.<sup>9</sup> Many of the affected countries will be in the Indo-Pacific region.

Climate change induced security risks to Australia's immediate region are also highlighted in the final report of the Senate inquiry on the implications of climate change for Australia's national security.<sup>10</sup> The report of the Senate inquiry recommended a 'climate security white paper' and an increase in climate change related foreign aid.<sup>11</sup> The particular vulnerability of the Indo-Pacific region to climate change is even highlighted in the policy discourses of the other AUKUS partner countries. Identifying the climate crisis as one of the significant transnational threats of the current century, the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy of the US clearly stated that '[t]he Indo-Pacific is the epicenter of the climate crisis, but it is also essential to climate solutions'.<sup>12</sup>

Lack of commitment to addressing climate change issues will be counterproductive for addressing security issues in the Asia-Pacific or the Indo-Pacific. A solid commitment to reducing emissions and an open mind on helping the island and coastal states of the Indo-Pacific with climate change mitigation and adaptation may gradually become a precursor for meaningful

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- 6 L. Smith, 'Despite its Pacific "step-up", Australia is still not listening to the region, new research shows', *The Conversation*, 11 February 2020, <<https://theconversation.com/despite-its-pacific-step-up-australia-is-still-not-listening-to-the-region-new-research-shows-130539>>.
  - 7 H-O Pörtner et al. (eds), *IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*, IPCC, 2019.
  - 8 See generally NL Bindoff et al., 'Changing ocean, marine ecosystems, and dependent communities' in Pörtner et al., *IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*, p. 447.
  - 9 M Oppenheimer et al., 'Sea level rise and implications for low-lying islands, coasts and communities' in Pörtner et al., *IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*, pp. 321, 400.
  - 10 Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, *Implications of climate change for Australia's national security*, Department of the Senate, 2018, <[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign\\_Affairs\\_Defence\\_and\\_Trade/Nationalsecurity/Final\\_Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Nationalsecurity/Final_Report)>.
  - 11 Ibid. Also see MS Karim, 'Climate change and maritime security', Parliament of Australia [website], 2017, <[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign\\_Affairs\\_Defence\\_and\\_Trade/Nationalsecurity/Submissions](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Nationalsecurity/Submissions)>.
  - 12 'Indo-Pacific Strategy of The United States', February 2022, The White House [website], <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>>.

engagement with the developing countries in the region on any security architecture. Security and climate change related cooperation will be inherently intertwined. This missing link should not be ignored in AUKUS initiatives.

### Climate Change, Maritime Security and Australia

Climate change may further increase many traditional, non-traditional and human security threats in the Indo-Pacific region. According to a recent IPCC report, '[h]uman-induced climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region'.<sup>13</sup> The Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs of the United Nations emphatically stated:

[C]limate-related security risks already form part of reality for millions of people around the world. Science tells us that without decisive action, climate change will further accelerate, with compounding implications for peace and security.<sup>14</sup>

In the United Nations Security Council, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) made the following statement demonstrating the climate change induced security concerns of the region:

Climate change is the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific. As PIF, we are collectively addressing this Council today because the links between climate and security for our region are indivisible and demonstrable.<sup>15</sup>

Climate change is an existential threat for some Pacific Islands countries. Support for any security initiative that has implications for the Pacific Islands countries is most likely possible only if the initiative acknowledges this existential threat to the small island countries.

The situation is similar in many developing coastal countries in Asia, where climate change may work as a catalyst for multiplying traditional and non-traditional security threats, including livelihood insecurity, increasing disasters, loss of territory, and forced displacement of people.<sup>16</sup> This is creating enormous pressure on those countries' already fragile security apparatus. Some of the Asian climate-vulnerable countries are among the most densely populated countries. Climate change related environmental and ecological threats may induce serious security risks for those countries and the wider region.

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- 13 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate change 2021: the physical science basis – summary for policymakers*, IPCC, 2021, <[https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WGI\\_SPM\\_final.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_SPM_final.pdf)>.
- 14 'Climate change multiplying factors that lead to insecurity for millions, Rosemary DiCarlo tells "Arria Formula" meeting', United Nations Department of Political Affairs [website], 22 April 2020, <<https://dppa.un.org/en/climate-change-multiplying-factors-lead-to-insecurity-millions-rosemary-dicarlo-tells-arria-formula>>.
- 15 'Pacific Islands Forum Statement for the High-level Open Debate of the UN Security Council on "Climate and Security"', 24 July 2020, Permanent Mission of Tuvalu to the United Nations [website], <[https://www.un.int/tuvalu/statements\\_speeches/pacific-islands-forum-statement-high-level-open-debate-un-security-council->](https://www.un.int/tuvalu/statements_speeches/pacific-islands-forum-statement-high-level-open-debate-un-security-council->)>.
- 16 R Warner & S Kaye, 'Shifting currents: climate change and maritime security in the Asia Pacific' in J McDonald, J McGee & R Barnes (eds), *Research handbook on climate change, oceans and coasts*, Edward Elgar, 2020, pp. 394–408; S Bateman & A Bergin, 'Naval, national security and defence issues from climate change' in McDonald, McGee & Barnes, *Research handbook on climate change, oceans and coasts*, pp. 409–424.

Many Asian countries are already considering the impact of climate change as a maritime security issue. For example, according to the Indian government, climate change has 'started impacting human and maritime security, with potentially major effects in the future'.<sup>17</sup> In fact, in other security initiatives, the Australian government has also recognised climate change as a significant concern. For example, the Australia–India maritime cooperation declaration identified climate change as a 'shared concern'.<sup>18</sup> Even the four-nations Quad initiative has acknowledged that 'the climate crisis has accelerated; and regional security has become ever-more complex, testing all of our countries individually and together'.<sup>19</sup>

Compared to other security initiatives or alliances of Australia, AUKUS is silent about climate change, which may create some challenges for broader legitimacy and acceptance of this initiative by many Indo-Pacific developing countries.

As noted earlier, AUKUS was received with reservation by some of Australia's allies in the region. Australia's enhanced military capability will make the region more secure from emerging hegemonic powers. Some Asian middle power countries have common security interests with Australia against emerging hegemonic powers. This raises the question why they are opposing AUKUS. One possible explanation is the differing views regarding navigational rights of nuclear ships. Although Australia will not be the first country to have nuclear-powered warships, and Australia's nuclear submarines will not be the only nuclear ships navigating their waters, it should be noted that Pacific Islands countries have some serious environmental concerns regarding nuclear. The historical injustice they endured because of the Western world's nuclear weapons testing in the region will always make them sceptical about this. There is also a need to respect the spirit of the Treaty of Rarotonga, to which Australia is a party.<sup>20</sup> Australia needs to resolve this issue by increasing dialogue with the Pacific Islands countries.

Australia's overall approach towards non-traditional security issues, particularly the resistance to considering climate change as a security issue, may play a negative role here. Non-inclusion of climate change in AUKUS itself is not the main problem. However, it is contributing to the overall perception that Australia is rejecting climate change as a security issue. As noted by a think tank, 'Australia has fallen well behind the US, UK, Japan, New Zealand and other peers in analysis of climate and security risks'.<sup>21</sup> The same report also identified that 'Australia's failure to take stronger action in the face of mounting security risks from climate change is already coming at a significant cost to our international standing and influence'.<sup>22</sup> This lack of influence is arguably evident in the recent Solomon Islands agreement with China.

17 Ministry of Defence, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, Indian Navy, 2015, <[https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian\\_Maritime\\_Security\\_Strategy\\_Document\\_25Jan16.pdf](https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf)>.

18 'Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Between the Republic of India and the Government of Australia', Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, <<https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/india/joint-declaration-shared-vision-maritime-cooperation-indo-pacific-between-republic-india-and-government-australia>>.

19 Prime Minister of Australia, 'Quad Leaders' Summit Communique', media statement, 24 September 2021, <<https://www.pm.gov.au/media/quad-leaders-summit-communique>>.

20 South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, 6 August 1985, 1445 UNTS 177.

21 C Durrant, S Bradshaw & A Pearce, *Rising to the challenge: addressing climate and security in our region*, Climate Council of Australia, 2021, p. 3.

22 Ibid, 23.

## Australia and Indo-Pacific Security Geopolitics in a Changing Climate

AUKUS is a security partnership between Australia, the UK and the US. However, Australia is unique within the group. Australia is, in a sense, a de facto Pacific and Asian country. This is not just an assertion. For example, in the Pacific, Australia is a member of the PIF, the Pacific Community, and the Forum Fisheries Agency. In Asia, the situation is relatively different. Australia is not a full member of any significant sub-regional organisation (e.g., ASEAN).<sup>23</sup> But the geographical location of Australia cannot be ignored. Unlike the European or African unions, there is no Asian organisation covering the entire region. Not belonging to any sub-regional groups does not necessarily mean that Australia is not an Asian country. For example, Australia is a member of the Asian Football Confederation. In the Indian Ocean region, which includes many parts of Asia, Australia is a full member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission. Australia maintains a strong relationship with Asian coastal states in the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission. Moreover, Australia is economically and politically more connected with climate change impacted Asian and Pacific countries than the other two partners of AUKUS. Australia's proactive climate action is critical for creating legitimacy for different security initiatives under AUKUS.

Despite its geographical location at the centre of the Indo-Pacific, Australia faces an identity crisis in the region. In the perception of some other countries in the region, Australia is neither Indo nor Pacific. Moreover, Australia's definition of Indo-Pacific does not include the entire Indian Ocean region.<sup>24</sup> This raises a broader question about Australia's endeavour to promote the Indo-Pacific against the Asia-Pacific. As noted earlier, Australia is a Pacific country and a member of the PIF. At the same time, Australia very rarely talks like a Pacific country. In most cases, understandably, Australia's voice is more akin to the voices of the other Western nations. For example, the Australian security narrative does not necessarily sound like the Pacific Islands narrative of 'Blue Pacific' or 'large ocean states'.<sup>25</sup>

Maritime security discourses of many Indo-Pacific countries are inherently intertwined with their climate change induced existential threats and/or insecurity. In contrast, climate change is just an occasional and peripheral matter in the dominant discourses of Australian maritime security policies. As noted by an expert group, 'climate change remains on the margins of Australia's defense, foreign affairs, and trade strategies'.<sup>26</sup>

23 MS Karim, 'Australia's engagement in the International Maritime Organisation for Indo-Pacific maritime security', *Ocean and Coastal Management*, vol. 185, 2020, 105032, <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2019.105032>>.

24 D Brewster, 'Australia can't continue to divide the Indian Ocean in two', *The Interpreter*, 19 February 2020, <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-can-t-continue-divide-indian-ocean-two>>.

25 W Morgan, 'Large ocean states: Pacific regionalism and climate security in a new era of geostrategic competition', *East Asia*, vol. 39, 2022, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-021-09377-8>>.

26 Durrant, Bradshaw & Pearce, 2021, 3.

The underlying difference in perception acts as a catalyst for the Pacific Islands countries' hesitation and concerns about AUKUS initiatives. Moreover, Australia's emissions reduction commitments and overall standing on climate action are, at least in the perception of some Indo-Pacific developing nations,<sup>27</sup> significantly poorer than those of the other two partners of AUKUS. There is potential to change this by transforming AUKUS into a significant climate change security partnership through engagement with other regional allies in the same direction.

## Conclusion

Many Indo-Pacific coastal and island states are among the most climate change impacted countries. Climate change has already turned into a maritime security threat for these countries. Climate change has also become an existential threat for some small islands and low-lying countries. Therefore, both the macro and micro levels of maritime security are now delicate issues for many Indo-Pacific coastal and island states. Despite the apparent detachment of AUKUS from climate-induced maritime insecurity, the two may interrelate in some circumstances.

Strong commitment to climate action by AUKUS is not necessarily a panacea for better engagement with the Indo-Pacific developing nations. Many other geopolitical issues may play a role in this regard. Nevertheless, total disregard for the climate-induced maritime insecurity of developing country allies of Australia in the region may create a legitimacy crisis for the initiative. Therefore, in addition to traditional defence capacity development, engagement on climate change and other non-traditional security issues should be given some attention in AUKUS initiatives. The grand or dominant narrative of traditional maritime security should not fully outshine non-traditional maritime security issues such as climate change. A multidimensional and multifocal maritime security policy is needed in a highly diverse and extensive region like the Indo-Pacific.

While this article was under review, a new Australian government came to power with a mandate for climate action. There is a chance for a seismic shift in the country's climate change policy because the new parliament includes many independent and minor party members with a firm commitment to climate action. The new Foreign Minister has already declared that they would like to end 'the climate wars in Australia' and promised to 'stand shoulder to shoulder' with the Pacific 'in response to this crisis'.<sup>28</sup> However, it is premature to comment on the actual impact of the changing policy.

27 'Pacific leaders condemn Australia's "weak" climate target in open letter to Scott Morrison', *The Guardian*, 1 December 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/01/pacific-leaders-condemn-australias-weak-climate-target-in-open-letter-to-scott-morrison>>; M Slezak & M Clarke, 'Australia widely criticised over emission reduction targets ahead of COP26 climate talks', ABC News, 20 August 2021, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-20/climate-change-ipcc-australia-uk-conference-glasgow/100392252>>.

28 D Hurst, K Lyons & L Movono, 'Penny Wong tells Pacific nations "we have heard you" as Australia and China battle for influence', *The Guardian*, 26 May 2022, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/26/penny-wong-tells-pacific-nations-we-have-heard-you-as-australia-and-china-battle-for-influence>>.



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