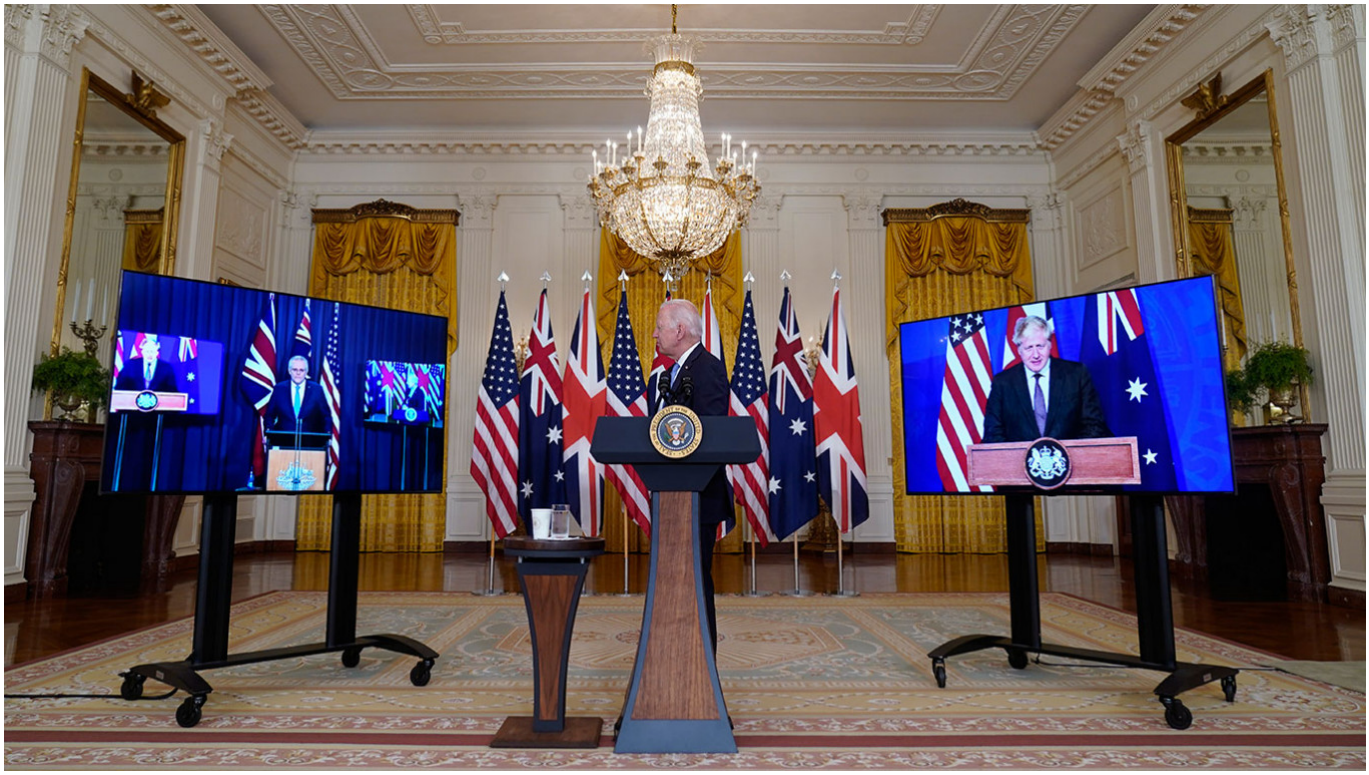
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Should Russia Be Worried by the New AUKUS Alliance?

Decisions made by NATO may be unpalatable for Moscow, but they are generally consistent and predictable. The same cannot be said of alliances like AUKUS.

By Andrei Kortunov

September 30, 2021



President Joe Biden, listens as he is joined virtually by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, left, and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. **Andrew Harnik / AP / TASS**

The establishment of a new trilateral military and political alliance consisting of the United States, Australia, and the UK (AUKUS) and the corollary rupture of France's "contract of the century" to build a new generation of diesel-powered submarines for Australia elicited mixed reactions in Russia. Some were pleased to see a conflict arise between the United States and France, while some expressed concern that the alliance targets Moscow just as much as it does Beijing.

Others were worried about the implications of the U.S. decision to share nuclear submarine technology with a non-nuclear state (instead of the French diesel submarines, Canberra will now get eight nuclear submarines).

These are valid points, but they all focus on the short-term consequences of the creation of AUKUS. Yet the decision to form a trilateral union and the new format of modernizing Australia's underwater fleet will also have long-term implications, including for Russia.

Above all, the launch of AUKUS has confirmed that the standoff with China is indisputably the number one foreign policy priority for U.S. President Joe Biden and his administration.

Standing up to China is apparently worth risking a serious fallout with Paris over, worth putting Canberra in an awkward position, and worth expanding the interpretation of nonproliferation. The fact is that it's getting increasingly difficult for Washington to single-handedly compete with Beijing in the naval arena, especially in the eastern Pacific Ocean, so it has no choice but to lean on its most reliable partners while ignoring the inevitable costs.

Related article: Russia, Belarus Launch Massive Military Drills as NATO Watches

Nuclear-powered submarines have only one indisputable advantage over modern diesel submarines: a greater operating range, thanks to their superior autonomy.

If the new submarines were intended only to defend Australia, there would be no need for them to be nuclear. If, however, they are expected to perform covert operations over many months in more remote waters—in the Taiwan Strait, near the Korean Peninsula, or somewhere in the Arabian Sea — then a nuclear reactor would be a significant advantage.

For Russia, this means that any of its actions from now on will be viewed by Washington within the context of the U.S.-Chinese confrontation. The White House will, for example, turn a blind eye to Moscow's cooperation with New Delhi and Hanoi on military technology, seeing it as a way to shore up the regional counterbalance to Beijing. Russia's ongoing assistance with China's naval modernization program, on the other hand, will be closely scrutinized and could become grounds for new U.S. sanctions against both countries.

There has been some speculation that AUKUS will, with time, become an Asian equivalent of NATO, with more countries joining, from Canada and New Zealand to Japan and South Korea, and eventually even India and Vietnam. These predictions have unsurprisingly elicited concern in Russia.

Yet they are unlikely to come true. Countries like South Korea and India have no desire to join a multilateral military alliance that could jeopardize their relations with other countries. In any case, the establishment of a new structure is in itself an indirect acknowledgement by Washington that the twentieth-century rigid model of alliances is not right for this century. If anything, AUKUS is an attempt to find a modern alternative to NATO.

It's inevitable that the role of NATO in U.S. strategy will decrease, but that's not necessarily in Russia's long-term interests if it means the organization will be replaced with structures such as AUKUS. NATO has detailed and clearly articulated decisionmaking procedures and

mechanisms for reaching compromises among its many members.

Decisions made by NATO may be unpalatable for Moscow, but they are generally consistent and predictable. The same cannot be said of less heavyweight structures such as AUKUS, from which any number of improvised reactions could ensue, inevitably adding to the political risks.

The concept of AUKUS envisages that control of ocean lanes will continue to be a U.S. priority. The United States is not capable of establishing sufficient control over land transport corridors in Eurasia, nor does it need to do so: the main global cargo traffic routes will be maritime for the foreseeable future. For this reason, it is the world's oceans rather than continental Eurasia that will be the main battleground between the United States and China.

For Russia, as a predominantly land power, that is overall a good thing — as long as Moscow doesn't strive to position itself at the epicenter of the Chinese-American standoff.

In theory, in a couple of decades' time, Australian submarines could turn up off the coast of Russia's Sakhalin Island and Kamchatka Peninsula, or even cross the Bering Strait into the Arctic Ocean, creating a new potential threat for Russia's Northern Fleet. There is every reason to suppose, however, that their main routes will lie much further south, and will not directly impinge upon Russian interests.

Related article: Zapad 2021: What We Learned From Russia's Massive Military Drills

It is noteworthy that at around the same time as the establishment of AUKUS, China submitted an application to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

The TPP was actually conceived as part of the strategy for China's economic containment under former U.S. president Barack Obama, though his successor Donald Trump refused to take part in the initiative. China's chances of joining the TPP are slim, but in making the request, Beijing is once again demonstrating that for its part, it would like to limit its rivalry with Washington to the realm of trade, investment, and technology. By creating AUKUS, on the other hand, the United States and its partners are increasingly signaling their intention of extending the confrontation to the field of military technology and the geopolitical arena.

Back in May 1882, when Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy agreed to establish the military and political bloc known as the Triple Alliance, it's unlikely that anyone in Europe gave a second thought to the possible long-term consequences. After all, the aim of the alliance was purely the containment of France, where revanchism was rife following the country's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1872. There were no bigger plans in Berlin, Vienna, or Rome at that time.

Yet little more than 30 years later, the European continent was awash with the bloodshed of an unprecedented war.

Today, AUKUS looks like a rickety and unstable structure cobbled together in a hurry. But in 20 or 30 years, the logic that prompted its members to establish a new military and political

alliance could lead them into a situation that neither they nor their opponents can get out of without the most severe consequences for themselves and the rest of the world. That is the main long-term danger from AUKUS.

This article was first published by the Carnegie Moscow Center.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/09/30/should-russia-be-worried-by-the-new-aukus-alliance-a75175