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THE US IS REFOCUSING ITS FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES ON THE INDO-PACIFIC

RECALIBRATING ALLIANCE POLITICS IN A PIVOTAL REGION

The United States under President Joe Biden is strengthening efforts to constrain China in the Indo-Pacific region. At least for now, a new US focus on the region is aimed primarily at reinforcing “minilateral” alignments, potentially at the expense of the EU and its member states.

The first-ever “live” summit between the leaders of the US, Australia, India and Japan – the “Quad” grouping – will take place in Washington D.C. on Friday 24 September. The meeting has been preceded by Australia’s announcement on 16 September that it would abandon a 56-billion-euro contract with France for the construction of twelve diesel-powered submarines, opting instead to develop nuclear-fuelled submarines conjointly with the US and the UK. This would boost Australia’s naval capabilities in the Indo-Pacific, including in the South China Sea.

Canberra’s change of mind coincided with the announcement of a new trilateral security agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

This defence pact, under the acronym AUKUS, would allow the three countries to work more closely together in sharing key military and defence technologies.

France reacted with outrage, and EU foreign ministers, after a delay, indicated solidarity with Paris, expressing disappointment with Australia’s reneging on the contract. Interestingly, on the same day that AUKUS saw the light of day, the EU launched its own Indo-Pacific strategy, following regional strategy papers by member states France – the first to publish an Indo-Pacific strategy in 2018 – as well as Germany and the Netherlands in 2020.

These interconnected developments have a threefold significance. First, the events show that the Indo-Pacific region is the number

one priority for the US, particularly after the withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Biden administration is keen to send an amplified message to China that it is willing to defend US interests. The AUKUS pact serves that function by including the UK, a country that this year announced its own “defence tilt” to the Indo-Pacific and, importantly, shares nuclear technology with the US. The signal to China is further strengthened by sharing military and nuclear technology with Australia through the submarine deal.

Second, the recent developments are illustrative of a shift in the hub-and-spokes alliance system towards a stronger focus on minilateralism, namely cooperation at the tri- and quadrilateral level, of which the newly-created AUKUS

and the Quad are examples. What these structures have in common with others, such as the Australia-Japan-US trilateral strategic dialogue (TSD), the India-Japan-US and the Australia-India-Japan trilateral dialogues, is a focus on issue-based cooperation. Earlier this year, for instance, the US, Japan and Australia created a partnership for Indo-Pacific infrastructure investment.

The Quad as well, which started as a low-key and informal consultation mechanism at the level of senior officials, has now grown into a summit-level gathering with slightly more meat on the bones. In addition to likely issuing a strong statement on the situation in the Taiwan Strait for the first time, the forthcoming summit will focus on cooperation on creating a safe supply chain for semiconductors, and on building communication networks, with both issues sending strong signals to Beijing. Another recent addition to the sphere of alignment is the Quad Plus level, in which cooperation in one field is extended to include other strategic regional partners such as South Korea or Vietnam.

Third, the US's prioritization of national interests and strong effort to bolster regional partnerships in

order to constrain China risk alienating other actors, including the EU and individual EU member states, which favour a more inclusive regional order. The EU's as well as member states' Indo-Pacific strategies, for example, give a central role to ASEAN in the regional architecture, and emphasize an inclusive (i.e. not directly countering China) approach to the region. As a result of its more "woolly" approach, the EU may continue to diverge from the US position. The most recent submarine commotion, for example, may affect the EU-US Trade and Technology Council meeting in Pittsburgh on 29 September. The incident may also jeopardize the envisaged progress on EU-US semiconductor manufacturing, and could also stall trade negotiations between the EU and Australia.

In short, a US-driven network of strategic partnerships is expanding at multiple levels and in diverse formats. It follows that the chances of a comprehensive anti-China alliance or an Asia NATO arising in the Indo-Pacific remain low. Instead, partnerships in the Indo-Pacific are likely to increasingly focus on pragmatic, functional, and issue-based

cooperation, while offering countries such as India and others a way to avoid openly confronting China.

Rather than seeking grand gestures such as renegotiating US re-entry into mega-regional trade deals, the Biden administration is aiming for a more proactive stance in the Indo-Pacific by fostering a network of allies and partners who welcome US leadership and are eager to buffer China's growing regional influence. Minilateral, issue-based cooperation is the name of the game. In this context, the EU can play a role in the region, bolstering its own strengths.

The EU can notably cooperate with regional partners, including the US, in fields such as the promotion of democracy and the rule of law; trade relations; connectivity and its regulatory framework; and the promotion of sustainable development through "green alliances", for example. France, for its part, and as a player with direct territorial interests in the Indo-Pacific, may well become a part of a Quad Plus arrangement in the future. For this to occur, however, it will eventually need to patch up relations with both the US and Australia. /