

New Focus, New Strategy, New Pacts



By Anita Tang

October 6, 2021

The United States withdrew from Afghanistan and shifted its concentration to the East, where China is now its number-one priority. Allies and critics alike condemned the United States over the botched end to its 20-year NATO campaign in Afghanistan; a leading German politician slammed the pullout as "the biggest debacle" in the alliance's history¹.

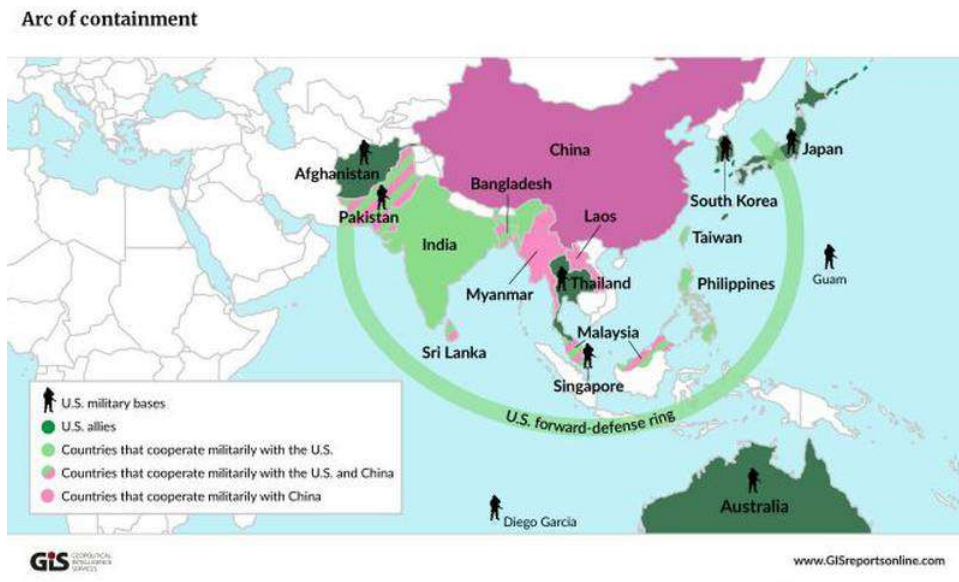
The Quad alliance involving the United States, Japan, India, and Australia was revived in 2017 to counter China militarily and diplomatically in the South China Sea. A new trilateral security pact, Aukus, was unveiled most recently. Under Aukus, the U.S and Britain will share nuclear-submarine technology with Australia to be deployed in the Pacific region.

To contain China, the U.S. is souring its relationship with long-time Western allies. How sustainable are relationships if trust is gone?

¹ "Allies Round on U.S. over Afghanistan 'Debate'," France 24, August 16, 2021. Retrieved on September 28, 2021, from <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210816-allies-round-on-us-over-afghanistan-debate>

China is the United States' #1 Priority

The United States is refocusing its global strategy in Asia Pacific, rallying regional support for a China-containment strategy.



The recent resurgence of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a security cooperation among the United States, Japan, India, and Australia, and the most recent announcement on September 15, 2021 of Aukus, a trilateral security pact involving the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, are clear signs that the U.S. is moving the physical playing field to Asia, in the name of security and defense.

While new pacts are being formed, allies in certain old pacts may feel being abandoned by the United States.

EU Council President Charles Michel criticized the United States for a “lack of transparency and loyalty” towards its trans-Atlantic partners, as evidenced by America’s unilateral decision to withdraw from Afghanistan and its new Pacific defense pact that left France out in the cold².

² “The Latest: Pakistan says No Rush to Recognize Taliban Government,” The Associated Press, September 21, 2021. Retrieved on September 29, 2021, from <https://www.chron.com/news/article/The-Latest-Johnson-to-Bolsonaro-vaccines-save-16473581.php>

Quad – the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue



The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue was initiated by Japan in 2007. It is an alliance of four countries – the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. The Quad’s initiation was widely viewed as a response to increased Chinese economic and military power. However, it ceased the same year it was formed following the withdrawal of Australia because Australia had decided to boost its ties with China instead.³

The Quad alliance was revived 10 year later in 2017 to counter China militarily and diplomatically in the South China Sea.

In a joint statement in March 2021 – “The Spirit of the Quad” – Quad members described “a shared vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, and a rules-based maritime order in the East and South China Seas,” indicating that Quad member-countries needed to counter Chinese maritime claims.⁴

Quad members have established the basis for regular defense cooperation through naval exercises, and the sharing of intelligence and military logistics. They are closely linked by the Malabar Exercises. The Malabar Exercises began in 1992 as bilateral naval drills between India and the U.S.; they were expanded in 2015 when Japan became a permanent member, and in 2020, Australia joined at the invitation of India. Further, it is most likely

³ “Quadrilateral Security Dialogue,” Wikipedia. Retrieved on September 28, 2021, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quadrilateral_Security_Dialogue

⁴ “Quad Leaders, Meeting in Person for First Time, are Seen to Plan Several Initiatives for Confronting China,” Robert Delaney, South China Morning Post, September 24, 2021. Retrieved on September 28, 2021, from <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3149884/quad-leaders-meeting-person-first-time-are-seen-plan-several>

that this network has the potential to build a “Quad Plus” arrangement involving Canada, France, and perhaps New Zealand and the United Kingdom.⁵

Then, on September 24, 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden hosted Quad leaders to meet, for the first time in-person, in the United States. The four leaders unveiled a slate of new initiatives and commitments including vaccine diplomacy, infrastructure development, North Korean denuclearization, and Afghanistan resolution.

Though U.S. officials have argued publicly that the alliance is not aimed at any one particular country, it appears quite clearly that the Quad intends to pursue a multifaceted agenda in the Indo-Pacific and beyond that competes with the economic, diplomatic, and hard security capabilities wielded by Beijing.⁶



Photo by Min An from Pexels

In the short-term, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) welcomes the new vaccine partnership because member-states desperately need access to more vaccines. Passing that, ASEAN member-states remain suspicious of the grouping and see Quad as a challenge to “ASEAN centrality.” Although many in the region are worried about China’s growing influence and

aggressive actions in the South China Sea, they largely prefer to manage China’s rise by engaging and “enmeshing” Beijing in ASEAN institutions and mechanisms, rather than relying on a counter-coalition of major powers.⁷

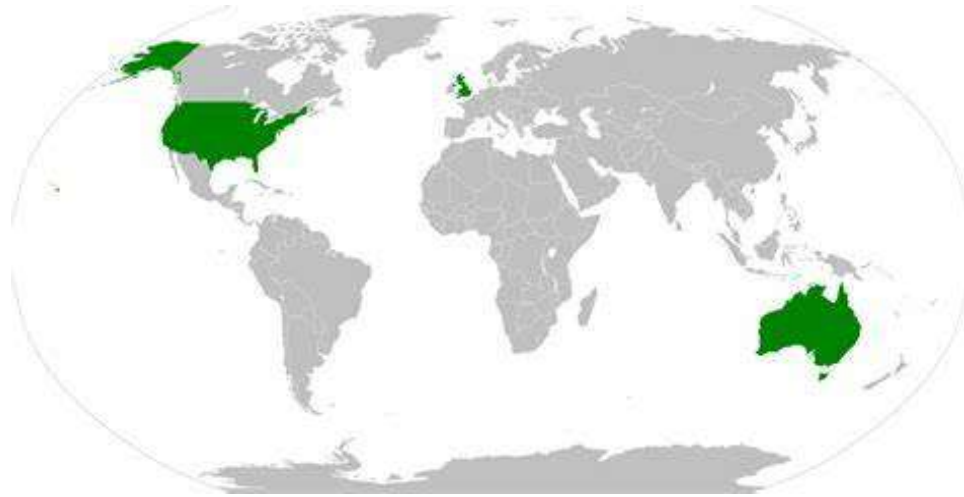
ASEAN nations also registered their concerns or encouragement of Aukus after the recent announcement of its creation as a trilateral security partnership.

⁵ “U.S.-Led Quad Plans Joint Naval Exercises as China Tensions Boil Over,” Laura Zhou, South China Morning Post, August 23, 2021. Retrieved on September 28, 2021, from <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3146085/us-led-quad-plans-joint-naval-exercises-china-tensions-boil>

⁶ “Is the Quad a Nascent Alliance to Counter China in the Indo-Pacific?” Daniel Markey, Carla Freeman, Brian Harding, Mirna Galic and Vikram J. Singh, United States Institute of Peace, September 28, 2021. Retrieved on September 28, 2021, from <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/09/reactions-quad-leaders-summit>

⁷ “ASEAN and the Quad: Strategic Impasse or Avenue for Cooperation?” Jonathan Stromseth, Brookings Institution, September 23, 2021. Retrieved on October 3, 2021, from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/09/23/asean-and-the-quad-strategic-impasse-or-avenue-for-cooperation>

Aukus – the Australia-U.K.-U.S. Trilateral Security Pact



Announced on September 15, 2021, Aukus is a trilateral security pact by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Under the pact, the U.S. and the U.K. will help Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines.

The pact also includes cooperation on cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and additional undersea capabilities⁸. In short, the pact focuses on military capability. Laura Southgate noted in her September 23, 2021 *The Diplomat* article⁹ that “there can be little doubt that the motive underpinning Aukus is to counter Chinese maritime dominance in the Indo-Pacific.”

Just ahead of the Aukus announcement, Australia cancelled a US\$ 65-billion order it inked with France in 2016 to purchase French-built diesel-electric submarines. When it was blindsided by the launch of Aukus, France recalled its ambassadors to the United States and Australia shortly after the pact’s announcement.¹⁰

⁸ “Aukus,” Wikipedia. Retrieved on October 3, 2021, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AUKUS>

⁹ “Aukus: The View from ASEAN,” Laura Southgate, *The Diplomat*, September 23, 2021. Retrieved on October 3, 2021, from

¹⁰ “France Recalls U.S. and Australia Ambassadors amid Row over Trilateral Nuclear Pact,” *Independent Global News*, September 20, 2021. Retrieved on October 3, 2021, from <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/aukus-the-view-from-asean>
https://www.democracynow.org/2021/9/20/headlines/france_recalls_us_and_australia_ambassadors_amid_row_over_trilateral_nuclear_pact

France is a major global weapons exporter; not only does the canceled deal bring significant economic impact on its defense sector it also stands to lose out strategically in the Indo-Pacific, where the country holds significant interests.¹¹

A CNN report¹¹ noted that French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said he was “angry and bitter” about Australia’s new submarine agreement, and added that “this isn’t done between allies. It’s really a stab in the back.” In regard to the U.S., he said that “this brutal and unilateral decision resembles a lot of what Trump is doing.” Le Drian also released a joint statement with French Armed Forces Minister Florence Parly on September 15, 2021, saying, “The American choice to exclude a European ally and partner such as France from a structuring partnership with Australia, at a time when we are facing unprecedented challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, whether in terms of our values or in terms of respect for multilateralism based on the rule of law, shows a lack of coherence that France can only note and regret.”



ASEAN member-states registered mixed reactions about Aukus:

Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob expressed his fear that Aukus would “provoke other powers to act more aggressively in the region, especially in the South China Sea.” Ismail confirmed that “as a country within ASEAN, Malaysia holds the principle of maintaining ASEAN as a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality.”⁹

Indonesian Foreign Ministry confirmed that it was “very concerned about the continued arms race and projection of power in the region.”⁹

Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong welcomed the Aukus arrangement, expressing hopes that it would “contribute constructively to the peace and stability of the region and complement the regional architecture.”⁹

Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro L. Locsin, Jr. said that “The Philippines welcomes Australia’s decision to establish an enhanced trilateral

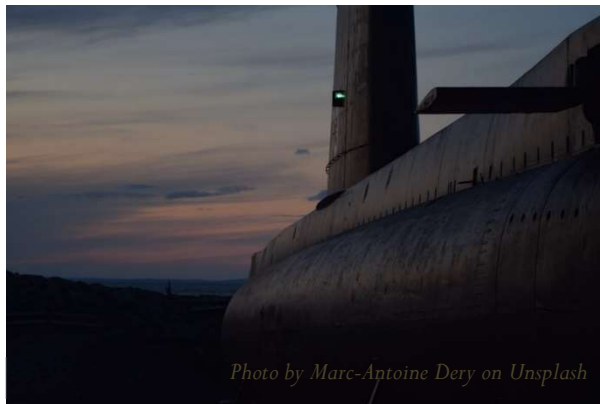
¹¹ “Why France is so Mad at the U.S./U.K. Deal with Australia,” CNN, September 17, 2021. Retrieved on October 3, 2021, from <https://www.mercurynews.com/2021/09/17/why-france-is-so-mad-at-the-us-uk-deal-with-australia>

security partnership with the United States primarily and the United Kingdom ... There is an imbalance in the forces available to the ASEAN member states, with the main balancer more than half a world away. The enhancement of a near abroad ally's ability to project power should restore and keep the balance rather than destabilize it.”¹²

Shekhar Sinha, a retired vice-admiral and former commander in the Indian Navy, said the nuclear-powered submarines would have a “significant impact” on the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific.¹³

Mixed feelings on Aukus by countries in the region aside, Desi Fortuna Anwar, a foreign policy expert from the Centre for Political Studies at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, straightened out a big concern: “Southeast-Asian countries did not want to be forced to choose sides in the intensifying rivalry between the U.S. and China.”¹⁴

On the technical side, Rafael Mariano Grossi, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of the United Nations, said that Aukus is “a technically very



tricky question and it will be the first time that a country that does not have nuclear weapons has a nuclear submarine.”¹⁵ Former Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, said that despite the new U.S.- Britain-Australia defense partnership, there was no contract signed for Australia to buy nuclear-powered submarines. He added that “Australia now has no new submarine

¹² “Does Aukus Augment or Diminish the Quad?” Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, The Diplomat, September 23, 2021. Retrieved on October 3, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/does-aukus-augment-or-diminish-the-quad>

¹³ “Aukus Fallout: For Years, U.S. told India it Couldn't Share Nuclear Submarine Technology. ‘And Now This ...’.” Pranay Sharma, South China Morning Post, September 20, 2021. Retrieved on October 3, 2021, from <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3149446/aukus-fallout-years-us-told-india-it-couldnt-share-nuclear>

¹⁴ “Aukus Won't Spark Asian Arms Race: U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia,” Resty Woro Yuniar, South China Morning Post, September 29, 2021. Retrieved on October 3, 2021, from <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3150626/aukus-wont-spark-asian-arms-race-us-ambassador-indonesia>

¹⁵ “Aukus Submarine Deal ‘Tricky’ for Nuclear Inspectors, says IAEA Chief,” South China Morning Post, September 28, 2021. Retrieved on October 3, 2021, from <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/australasia/article/3150482/aukus-submarine-deal-tricky-nuclear-inspectors-says-iaea>

program. The only certainty is that we won't have new submarines for 20 years and their cost will be a lot more than the French-designed subs.”¹⁶

The five nuclear-weapons states recognized by the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) are the United States, Russia, China, France, and Britain. Grossi confirmed that a signatory of the NPT can exclude nuclear material from IAEA supervision, while that material is fueling a submarine. It is a rare exception to the IAEA's constant supervision of all nuclear material to ensure it is not used to make atomic bombs.¹⁵

U.S. Relationships with Its Allies – Amend As It Goes?



Withdrawal from Afghanistan

After the U.S.' 20 years in Afghanistan where US\$ 2 trillion was spent, some 2,500 American service members were killed and more than 20,000 wounded, President Biden ordered the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Afghanistan on April 14 with an August 31 deadline. Washington is determined to refocus its resources on its No. 1 foreign-policy priority: China.

¹⁶ “Aukus Fallout: Morrison ‘Deceived’ France on Submarine Deal, says Former PM Turnbull,” Agence France-Presse, South China Morning Post, September 29, 2021. Retrieved on October 4, 2021, from <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/australasia/article/3150619/aukus-fallout-morrison-deceived-france-submarine-deal-says>

Not only did the withdrawal make headline news, angry U.S. allies on President Biden's "ruinous withdrawal from Afghanistan" created global waves of criticisms. CNS News reported:¹⁷

Tom Tugendhat, a British Army veteran of the Afghanistan war and the Conservative Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, said, "Afghanistan is the biggest foreign policy disaster since Suez ... We need to think again about how we handle friends, who matters and how we defend our interests."



Rory Stewart, former British Cabinet Member said that Biden "hasn't just humiliated America's Afghan allies ... He's humiliated his Western allies."

Dan Jarvis, Member of Parliament and Afghan War veteran, said Biden's comments on the withdrawal were "distasteful and dishonoring."

Chris Bryant, Member of Parliament, described Biden's remarks about Afghan soldiers as "some of the most shameful comments ever from an American president."

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said the images from the Kabul airport were "shameful for the political West."

Norbert Rottgen, Chairman of the German Parliament's Foreign Relations Committee, remarked: "It is the biggest debacle that NATO has suffered since its founding, and we're standing before an epochal change."

Josep Borrell, Vice President of the European Commission, described the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban as a "catastrophe" and a "nightmare."

¹⁷ "U.S. Allies Criticize Biden's Afghanistan Withdrawal: 'Shameful, Catastrophe, Nightmare'," Michael W. Chapman, CNS News, August 25, 2021. Retrieved on October 4, 2021, from <https://cnsnews.com/article/international/michael-w-chapman/us-allies-criticize-bidens-afghanistan-withdrawal-shameful>

Czech President Milos Zeman said, “By withdrawing from Afghanistan, the Americans have lost their status of global leader.”

Compared to his colleagues, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s remark was mild: “Nobody wants Afghanistan, once again, to be a breeding ground for terror ... It’s fair to say the U.S. decision to pull out has accelerated things.” Knowing that the Aukus pact would be announced soon and would greatly benefit its defense industry, Prime Minister Johnson certainly did not want to irritate his counterpart and pact partner, particularly when Brexit has already alienated his country with continental Europe.

Quad

ASEAN remains suspicious of the Quad grouping and sees it as a challenge to “ASEAN centrality.” The Quad allies, however, manages to flush out initial backers and opponents so that it can formulate strategies to strengthen backer alignment and win more allies, guard against opponents, or even turn them into supporters.

Those countries in the region concerned about China’s growing influence and aggressive actions in the South China Sea tend to keep a feasible relationship with China. If there is a counter force in the region, it may work for them as they may exercise better bargaining power either way.



Aukus

The Aukus pact was not without incident also. Shortly after the pact’s announcement, France recalled its Ambassadors to the United States and Australia. It is the first time since the U.S. and France became allies in 1778 that Paris has ordered its top diplomat back to France for consultations¹⁰. As a result of the Aukus deal, France lost a US\$ 65-billion contract to build submarines for Australia.

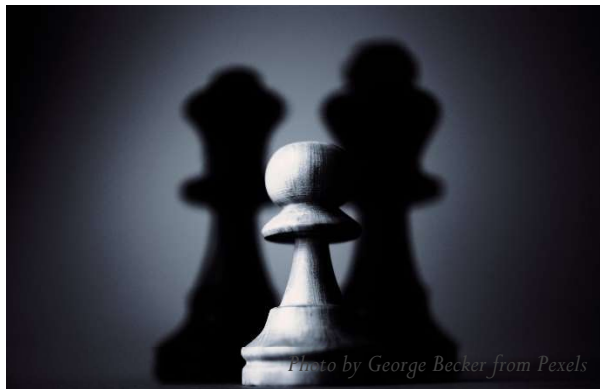
French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian accused President Joe Biden of acting like former President Donald.¹¹

Georgina Wright, Head of the Europe Program at Institut Montaigne, a nonprofit trans-partisan think tank based in Paris, asserted: “France’s position for a very long time ...

has been to say that the U.S. is an ally, but the U.S. is pivoting away from Europe and cannot fully be trusted.” The action of Biden proved that “when (the United States) makes a decision, they will go ahead with it and they won't think twice about their allies.”¹⁸

On September 22, a week after the Aukus announcement, U.S. President Joe Biden spoke with French President Emmanuel Macron and admitted to botching the rollout of a new security pact with the U.K. and Australia by snubbing France in the process. In a joint statement, Biden and Macron said, “The two leaders agreed that the situation would have benefitted from open consultations among allies on matters of strategic interest to France and our European partners. President Biden conveyed his ongoing commitment in that regard.”¹⁹ Also, it was agreed that talks would be held in October on better coordinating strategy in the Indo-Pacific with America’s European partners. The French Ambassador would return to Washington a week later.

In fact, the United States has not betrayed France, because Washington was merely furnishing Australia with an alternate submarine-sale option. President Biden’s admitting to President Marcon about the botched rollout of Aukus is giving the latter a great deal of face. After all, as pointed out by a September 23, 2021 NBC News article²⁰: delays and costs



increase on the French submarine prompted Australia to begin making inquiries about alternatives earlier in the year. Also, it is not unusual for governments to abandon problematic defense procurements. As is standard in such cases, the French submarine supplier will surely receive restitution which was provided for in a 2019 agreement.

¹⁸ “Biden’s Apparent Indifference to Aukus deal’s Impact on France Fueling Fury, Experts say,” Chantal Da Silva and Abigail Williams, NBC News, September 17, 2021. Retrieved on October 4, 2021, from

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/biden-s-apparent-indifference-aukus-deal-s-impact-france-fueling-n1279448>

¹⁹ “Biden Admits Botching Aukus Rollout After Call with France’s Macron,” Steven Nelson, New York Post, September 22, 2021. Retrieved on October 4, 2021, from <https://nypost.com/2021/09/22/biden-admits-botching-aukus-rollout-after-call-with-france>

²⁰ “The French Sunk the Submarine Deal, Not the U.S.,” Sébastien Roblin, NBC News, September 23, 2021. Retrieved on October 4, 2021, from <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/the-french-sunk-the-submarine-deal-not-the-us/ar-AAOIPzr>

What's Next?

To curb China's rapid technological rise and a concurrent quest to dominate emerging digital technologies, the United States, the world's long-time technology leader, started setting tariffs and other trade barriers on China in January 2018 which eventually turned into a full-blown trade war. Some even see this U.S.-China trade war spins into a new cold war.



Just this year, President Biden rounded up allies to revive the Blue Dot Network. The Build Back Better World Partnership was introduced since as an alternative infrastructure-ecosystem to China's Belt and Road Initiative which has an eight-year head start.

Not seeing any decisive advance in its economic race with China, the United States, the world's No. 1 military power²¹, is now setting up alliances to bring Western military presence in the Indo-Pacific to counter China's expansion in the region. While flexing its military muscles, such military expansion also serves the U.S. economic objectives very well, supporting its No. 1 position as the world's largest exporter of arms.

As noted by Anthony Rowley²², this is a “global political-economic chess game.”

It appears that the U.S. is willing to sacrifice its allies when taking certain actions and expecting that allies will return to its camp because it can always offer them other benefits of interests. Does best-friend-forever exist in geopolitics? Will distrust of the U.S. by its allies drive them into China's camp instead?

²¹ “The 10 Most Powerful Militaries in the World 2021,” Ejaz Khan, WondersList. Retrieved on October 4, 2021, from <https://www.wonderslist.com/10-most-powerful-militaries>

²² “Will Quad and Aukus alliances drive Europe into China's arms?” Anthony Rowley, South China Morning Post, October 4, 2021. Retrieved on October 5, 2021, from <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3150873/will-quad-and-aukus-alliances-drive-europe-chinas-arms>