

Do You Want a New Cold War?

The AUKUS Alliance Takes the World to the Brink

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Before it's too late, we need to ask ourselves a crucial question: Do we really — I mean truly — want a new Cold War with China?

Because that's just where the Biden administration is clearly taking us. If you need proof, check out last month's [announcement](#) of an "AUKUS" (Australia, United Kingdom, U.S.) military alliance in Asia. Believe me, it's far scarier (and more racist) than the nuclear-powered submarine deal and the French diplomatic kerfuffle that dominated the media coverage of it. By focusing on the dramatically angry French reaction to losing their own agreement to sell non-nuclear subs to Australia, most of the media [missed](#) a much bigger story: that the U.S. government and its allies have all but formally declared a new Cold War by launching a coordinated military buildup in East Asia unmistakably aimed at China.

It's still not too late to choose a more peaceful path. Unfortunately, this all-Anglo alliance comes perilously close to locking the world into just such a conflict that could all too easily become a hot, even potentially nuclear, war between the two wealthiest, most powerful countries on the planet.

If you're too young to have lived through the original Cold War as I did, imagine going to sleep fearing that you might not wake up in the morning, thanks to a nuclear war between the world's two superpowers (in those days, the United States and the Soviet Union). Imagine walking past [nuclear fallout shelters](#), doing "[duck and cover](#)" drills under your school desk, and experiencing other regular reminders that, [at any moment](#), a great-power war could end life on Earth.

Do we really want a future of fear? Do we want the United States and its supposed enemy to once again squander [untold trillions](#) of dollars on military expenditures while neglecting basic human needs, including universal health care, education, food, and housing, not to mention failing to deal adequately with that other looming existential threat, climate change?

A U.S. Military Buildup in Asia

When President Joe Biden, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared their all-too-awkwardly named AUKUS alliance, most of the media focused on a relatively small (though hardly insignificant) part of the deal: the U.S. sale of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia and that country's simultaneous cancellation of a 2016 contract to buy diesel-powered subs from France. Facing the loss of tens of billions of euros and being shut out of the Anglo Alliance, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called the deal a "[stab in the back](#)." For the first time in history, France briefly [recalled](#) its ambassador from Washington. French officials even [cancelled](#) a gala meant to celebrate Franco-American partnership dating back to their defeat of Great Britain in the Revolutionary War.

Caught surprisingly off guard by the uproar over the alliance (and the secret negotiations that preceded it), the Biden administration promptly took steps to repair relations, and the French ambassador soon returned to Washington. In September at the United Nations, President Biden [declared](#) declared that the last thing he wants is "a new Cold War or a world divided into rigid blocs." Sadly, the actions of his administration suggest otherwise.

Imagine how Biden administration officials would feel about the announcement of a "VERUCH" (VEnezuela, RUssia, and CHina) alliance. Imagine how they'd react to a buildup of Chinese military bases and thousands of Chinese troops in Venezuela. Imagine their reaction to regular deployments of all types of Chinese military aircraft, submarines, and warships in Venezuela, to increased spying, heightened cyberwarfare capabilities, and relevant space "activities," as well as military exercises involving thousands of Chinese and Russian troops not just in Venezuela but in the waters of the Atlantic within striking distance of the United States. How would Biden's team feel about the promised delivery of a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines to that country, involving the transfer of nuclear technology and nuclear-weapons-grade uranium?

None of this has happened, but these would be the Western Hemisphere equivalents of the "[major force posture initiatives](#)" U.S., Australian, and British officials have just announced for East Asia. AUKUS officials unsurprisingly portray their alliance as making parts of Asia "safer and more secure," while building "a future of peace [and] opportunity for all the people of the region." It's unlikely U.S. leaders would view a similar Chinese military buildup in Venezuela or anywhere else in the Americas as a similar recipe for safety and peace.

In reaction to VERUCH, calls for a military response and a comparable alliance would be rapid. Shouldn't we expect Chinese leaders to react to the AUKUS buildup with their own version of the same? For now, a Chinese government [spokesperson](#) suggested that the AUKUS allies "should shake off their Cold War mentality" and "not build exclusionary blocs targeting or harming the interests of third parties." The Chinese military's recent escalation of provocative exercises near Taiwan may be, in part, an additional response.

Chinese leaders have even more reason to doubt the declared peaceful intent of AUKUS given that the U.S. military already has [seven](#) military bases in [Australia](#) and nearly [300 more](#) spread across East Asia. By contrast, China doesn't have a single base in the Western Hemisphere or anywhere near the borders of the United States. Add in one more factor: in the last 20 years, the AUKUS allies have a track record of launching aggressive wars and participating in other conflicts from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya to Yemen, Somalia, and the Philippines, among other places. China's [last war](#) beyond its borders was with Vietnam for

one month in 1979. (Brief, deadly clashes occurred with Vietnam in 1988 and India in 2020.)

War Trumps Diplomacy

By withdrawing U.S. forces from Afghanistan, the Biden administration theoretically started moving the country away from its twenty-first-century policy of endless wars. The president, however, now appears determined to side with those in Congress, in the mainstream foreign policy “Blob,” and in the media who are [dangerously inflating](#) the Chinese military threat and calling for a military response to that country’s growing global power. The poor handling of relations with the French government is another sign that, despite prior promises, the Biden administration is paying little attention to diplomacy and reverting to a foreign policy defined by preparations for war, bloated military budgets, and macho military bluster.

Given the 20 years of disastrous warfare that followed the George W. Bush administration’s announcement of a “Global War on Terror” and its invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, what business does Washington have building a new military alliance in Asia? Shouldn’t the Biden administration instead be [building alliances](#) dedicated to [combating global warming](#), pandemics, hunger, and other urgent human needs? What business do three white leaders of three white-majority countries have attempting to dominate that region through military force?

While the leaders of [some](#) countries there have welcomed AUKUS, the three allies signaled the racist, retrograde, downright colonial nature of their Anglo Alliance by excluding other Asian countries from their all-white club. Naming China as its obvious target and escalating Cold War-style us-vs.-them tensions risk [fueling](#) already rampant anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racism in the United States and globally. Belligerent, often warlike rhetoric against China, associated with former President Donald Trump and other far-right Republicans, has increasingly been embraced by the Biden administration and some Democrats. It “has directly contributed to rising anti-Asian violence across the country,” [write](#) Asia experts Christine Ahn, Terry Park, and Kathleen Richards.

The less formalized “Quad” grouping that Washington has also organized in Asia, again including Australia as well as India and Japan, is little better and is already becoming a more [militarily focused](#) anti-Chinese alliance. [Other countries](#) in the region have indicated that they are “deeply concerned over the continuing arms race and power projection” there, as the [Indonesian government](#) said of the nuclear-powered submarine deal. Nearly silent and so difficult to detect, such vessels are offensive weapons designed to strike another country without warning. Australia’s future acquisition of them risks [escalating](#) a regional arms race and raises troubling questions about the intentions of both Australian and U.S. leaders.

Beyond Indonesia, people worldwide should be [deeply concerned](#) about the U.S. sale of nuclear-propelled submarines. The deal undermines efforts to stop the spread of nuclear weapons as it encourages the [proliferation](#) of nuclear technology and weapons-grade highly enriched uranium, which the U.S. or British governments will need to provide to Australia to fuel the subs. The deal also offers a precedent allowing other non-nuclear countries [like Japan](#) to advance nuclear-weapons development under the guise of building their own nuclear-powered subs. What’s to stop China or Russia from now selling their nuclear-powered submarines and weapons-grade uranium to Iran, Venezuela, or any other country?

Who’s Militarizing Asia?

Some will claim that the United States must counter China's growing military power, frequently [trumpeted](#) by U.S. media outlets. Increasingly, journalists, pundits, and politicians here have been irresponsibly parroting misleading depictions of Chinese military power. Such [fearmongering](#) is already [ballooning military budgets](#) in this country, while fueling arms races and increasing tensions, just as during the original Cold War. Disturbingly, according to a recent Chicago Council on Global Affairs [survey](#), a majority in the U.S. now appear to believe — however incorrectly — that Chinese military power is equal to or greater than that of the United States. In fact, our military power vastly exceeds China's, which simply [doesn't compare](#) to the old Soviet Union.

The Chinese government has indeed strengthened its military power in recent years by increasing spending, developing advanced weapons systems, and building an estimated [15](#) to [27](#) mostly small military bases and radar stations on human-made islands in the South China Sea. Nonetheless, the U.S. [military budget](#) remains at least three times the size of its Chinese counterpart (and higher than at the height of the original Cold War). Add in the military budgets of Australia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and other NATO allies like Great Britain and the discrepancy leaps to six to one. Among the approximately [750 U.S. military bases](#) abroad, [almost 300](#) are [scattered](#) across East Asia and the Pacific and dozens more are in other parts of Asia. The Chinese military, on the other hand, has [eight](#) bases abroad ([seven](#) in the South China Sea's Spratley Islands and [one](#) in Djibouti in Africa), plus bases in Tibet. The U.S. [nuclear arsenal](#) contains about 5,800 warheads compared to about 320 in the Chinese arsenal. The U.S. military has 68 [nuclear-powered submarines](#), the Chinese military 10.

Contrary to what many have been led to believe, China is not a military challenge to the United States. There is no evidence its government has even the remotest thought of threatening, let alone attacking, the U.S. itself. Remember, China last fought a war outside its borders in 1979. "The true challenges from China are political and economic, not military," Pentagon expert William Hartung has [rightly explained](#).

Since President [Obama's "pivot to Asia,"](#) the U.S. military has engaged in years of new base construction, aggressive military exercises, and displays of military force in the region. This has encouraged the Chinese government to build up its own military capabilities. Especially in recent months, the Chinese military has engaged in increasingly provocative [exercises](#) near Taiwan, though fearmongers again are [misrepresenting and exaggerating](#) how threatening they truly are. Given Biden's plans to escalate his predecessors' military buildup in Asia, no one should be surprised if Beijing announces a military response and pursues an AUKUS-like alliance of its own. If so, the world will once more be locked in a two-sided Cold-War-like struggle that could prove increasingly difficult to unwind.

Unless Washington and Beijing reduce tensions, future historians may see AUKUS as akin not just to various Cold-War-era alliances, but to the 1882 Triple Alliance between Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. That pact spurred France, Britain, and Russia to create their own Triple Entente, which, along with [rising nationalism](#) and geo-economic competition, [helped lead](#) Europe into World War I (which, in turn, begat World War II, which begat the Cold War).

Avoiding a New Cold War?

The Biden administration and the United States [must do better](#) than resuscitate the strategies of the nineteenth century and the Cold War era. Rather than further fueling a regional arms race with yet more bases and weapons development in Australia, U.S. officials

could help lower tensions between Taiwan and mainland China, while working to resolve territorial disputes in the South China Sea. In the wake of the Afghan War, President Biden could commit the United States to a foreign policy of diplomacy, peace-building, and opposition to war rather than one of endless conflict and preparations for more of the same. AUKUS's initial 18-month [consultation period](#) offers a chance to reverse course.

Recent polling suggests such moves would be popular. More than three times as many in the U.S. would like to see an increase, rather than a decrease, in diplomatic engagement in the world, according to the nonprofit [Eurasia Group Foundation](#). Most surveyed would also like to see fewer troop deployments overseas. Twice as many want to decrease the military budget as want to increase it.

The world [barely survived](#) the [original Cold War](#), which was [anything but cold](#) for the millions of people who lived through or died in the era's proxy wars in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Can we really risk another version of the same, this time possibly with Russia as well as China? Do we want an arms race and competing military buildups that would divert trillions of dollars more from pressing human needs while [filling the coffers](#) of arms manufacturers? Do we really want to risk triggering a military clash between the United States and China, accidental or otherwise, that could easily spin out of control and become a hot, possibly nuclear, war in which the [death and destruction](#) of the last 20 years of "forever wars" would look small by comparison.

That thought alone should be chilling. That thought alone should be enough to stop another Cold War before it's too late.

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