

KARAGATAN OBSERVER | SEPTEMBER 2021

Summary

The month of September saw the birth of an enhanced trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) – called “AUKUS”. The announcement sent shockwaves around the world and around the Indo-Pacific region, eliciting positive and negative reactions. Simultaneously, the Philippines celebrated Maritime and Archipelagic Nation Awareness Month (MANAMO) and continued the trend of fortifying its maritime sovereignty.

Prepared by

Florence Principe Gamboa
Matthew C. Uy

Date

1 October 2021

Recommended citation

APA: Gamboa, F.P. and Uy, M.C. (2021). “Karagatan Observer: September 2021.” *Amador Research Services*.

CMOS: Gamboa, Florence Principe and Matthew C. Uy. “Karagatan Observer: September 2021.” *Amador Research Services* (2021).

The month of September saw the birth of an [enhanced trilateral security partnership](#) between Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) – called “AUKUS”. The announcement sent shockwaves around the world and around the Indo-Pacific region, eliciting positive and negative reactions. Simultaneously, the Philippines celebrated Maritime and Archipelagic Nation Awareness Month (MANAMO) and continued the trend of fortifying its maritime sovereignty.

AUKUS Ruckus

A milestone in security relations was reached on September 15 with the inauguration of AUKUS. The enhanced partnership was described as the [next critical step](#) in an old alliance. Under this new trilateral security arrangement, the three states of Australia, the UK, and the US would see easier information sharing and technological exchange. Chief among these developments is Australia’s newborn access to [nuclear-powered submarines](#). In Australia, the partnership was described as a deal with “[very powerful](#)” symbolism and, assuming domestic politics do not interfere, will see the first of said nuclear submarines by the end of the 2030s. This comes after Australian Defence Minister Peter Dutton [pushed](#) a week earlier for greater access to US defense technology, a significant shift in the Australian defense posture.

International reaction has varied. The largest opposition in the West came from France. The nuclear-submarine deal under AUKUS nullified an existing deal between France and Australia. Australian Prime

Minister Scott Morrison defended AUKUS and [explained](#) that the decision was done for Australia's security interests. France's Foreign Ministry has [decried](#) the deal as "*unacceptable behavior between allies and partners*" towards the three states and that consequences would affect "*the importance of the Indo-Pacific for Europe*". A few days later, France announced it would enhance its strategic partnership [with India](#) to "*promote a truly multilateral international order*".

In the region, [Japan](#), and [Taiwan](#) expressed support for the stronger relationship and the advancement of Australia's security. Reactions elsewhere varied. The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs "[welcomed](#)" the enhanced alliance while [President Rodrigo Duterte](#) shared the concern of other [Southeast Asian states](#) of potential nuclear proliferation. [Reaction in India](#) has also been mixed. Some analysts have argued that the US should extend a similar deal to [South Korea](#), if only to bolster its credibility as an ally, especially after the Afghanistan debacle.

China's Entrenchment

China was [outraged](#) by AUKUS, seeing it as a means of containing its activities in the region. AUKUS was announced amid various strides in Chinese movement and influence.

First, China amended its [Maritime Traffic Safety Law](#). The [legislation](#) granted China the power to turn away any foreign vessel that "threatened the safety of Chinese internal or territorial waters" and to exercise the "right of immediate pursuit." The amended law would apply to the entirety of China's claimed sovereignty in the South China Sea. Prof. Paul Pedrozo of the US Naval War College [argued](#) that the new law was meant to "test the international community to gauge how it will react". China's [bolstered presence](#) in the region provides it the means to enforce the law, though its implementation is ambiguous.

Second, China has intensified its incursions in the region towards Indonesia and Taiwan. The same week AUKUS was announced, Chinese vessels were spotted in Indonesia's [North Natuna Sea](#). By September 28, Indonesia noted that the incursion – a survey ship and two Coast Guard vessels – was the [longest](#) in history.

Meanwhile, China sent [19 nuclear-capable bombers](#) into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) during the first week of September. [The largest incursion](#) into Taiwan's ADIZ since June 2021 occurred on the 24th. It comprised bombers, fighter jets, anti-submarine planes, and reconnaissance planes. This is reported to be in [response](#) to Taiwan's attempt to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Third, China juggled its relations with Europe, favoring Russia and denying others. China [denied German warship Bayern](#) entry into one of its harbors, arguing that outside countries should have a "constructive" role in maintaining regional peace and stability. This is in contrast to that same warship [warmly received in Australia](#), marking 30 years since the last visit of a German warship. Meanwhile, China strengthened its relationship with Russia. A Chinese firm won a contract to construct a [floating nuclear reactor](#). The

partnership in nuclear energy is one area that both states cooperate with the [shared goal](#) of undermining US influence.

North Korea Tests Missiles Anew

North Korea made news when it [successfully test-launched](#) a long-range cruise missile in early September, a first in six months. State-controlled Korean Central News Agency reported that the missile flew 1500km in 2 hours and 6 minutes and hit their targets at undisclosed locations. If true, the new missile could easily target South Korea and Japan. A week later it was reported via satellite imagery that North Korea was expanding its [uranium enrichment plant](#) for increased bomb production. Near the end of September, North Korea conducted [three weapons tests](#) of nuclear-capable missiles within two weeks.

Some of the tests were conducted via a [railway-borne missile system](#) and others originated close to the border with China. While some of the locations of the missiles' impacts are undisclosed, others were reported to have landed in or close to Japan's exclusive economic zones.

Desperate Times, Desperate Measures

Amid ongoing trends in individual states' advancements and asserting sovereignty and alongside the announcement of AUKUS, the US has reaffirmed its commitment to the region.

The US [condemned](#) China's maritime law. In a show of [defiance](#), the United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) conducted a freedom of navigation operation on Sept. 8. USINDOPACOM said that the operation was consistent with international law. At the same time as China announced its amended maritime law, the US and Australia [reaffirmed their security commitments](#) during the 70th anniversary of the [ANZUS Treaty](#).

Other states grappled with recent developments. Vietnam, amid its [flexible position](#), struggles to balance relations with the US and China. Its consistent foreign policy framework of "Three No's" is being [tested](#). Meanwhile, Japan held the [largest military drill](#) in 30 years, a "much-needed" logistical exercise and a message to China and the US. Japanese Defense Minister Nobuo Kishi [stated](#) unequivocally that the Senkaku Islands belonged to Japan and any Chinese threat would be matched "*ship for ship*". He also noted that the state of Taiwan was also an [issue for Japan](#).

Taiwan has made the most strides this month in defense of its sovereignty. After the worries brought upon by the [Afghanistan debacle](#), Taiwan released a report of [China's cyberattack capabilities](#) and their role in a possible invasion. On September 10, President Tsai Ing-wen officially commissioned the Ta Chiang corvette, a carrier-killer, as a step in the "*road to autonomy in our national defense*". A week later, Taiwanese fighter jets practiced landing on a [makeshift runway](#) on a highway strip, specifically designed for rapid conversion for military use.

MANAMO 2021

In line with the celebration and heightened awareness of the Philippines as a maritime and archipelagic nation, September saw many positive trends for Philippine sovereignty.

The UP Institute for Maritime Affairs and Law of the Sea released an [infographic](#) on the importance of maritime zones for the Philippines. Maritime domain awareness is a key element in asserting overall national sovereignty.

In terms of security, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana made several notable statements throughout the month. First, he revealed that [several projects](#) were undergoing construction in the West Philippine Sea (WPS). Among the projects are the cementing of a runway in Pag-asa and barracks and helipads among several islands. He also mentioned that assets would be [acquired](#) from South Korea and Australia to boost maritime patrols in the WPS. Second, the Philippines would [ignore](#) China's amended maritime law. He said that the law did not apply to the WPS and was an attempt by China to claim sovereignty in disputed waters.

Third, statements were made regarding the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT). Secretary Lorenza said that there was a need for a ["comprehensive review"](#) of the treaty, to make clear "the extent" of American commitments. One [reason](#) he cited for the review has to do with China's maritime law. He also revealed that China attempted to [oppose](#) a review of the treaty.

The review of the MDT did not diminish relations between the Philippines and the US. After the official retention of the Visiting Forces Agreement, Foreign Affairs Secretary Teodoro Locsin met with US State Secretary Antony Blinken to reaffirm the alliance and commit to ["ramp up" bilateral engagement](#). Joint exercises continued. The US Coast Guard collaborated with the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) in [Subic Bay](#) and in the larger WPS with the [cutter ship Munro](#).

The growing confidence in the Philippines' assertions were shown in notable occasions. During the week of AUKUS announcement, PCG Commandant Vice Admiral Leopoldo Larota reported that [Chinese ships leave](#) WPS when confronted by the PCG. Likewise, the PCG [assured](#) that Philippine waters were secure following a terror warning from the Embassy of Japan. The most notable was when President Duterte spoke at the 76th United Nations General Assembly, proclaiming the [2016 Arbitration Award](#) as benefitting all nations and cannot be diminished or discarded by any country.

Analysis

The inauguration of AUKUS, coupled with the implications of the Afghanistan debacle last August, North Korea's unpredictable behaviors, and China's continued aggression, has shown the region the importance of having concrete steps in maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

Developments on US-China relations show the intensified rivalry and power competition between the two. The divide is starkly seen as China and Russia versus US and other West-oriented countries. The US [capitalized on its allies](#) in the region especially with Australia through AUKUS. It would be beneficial for the US' strategy to provide [concrete commitments](#) to its other regional allies the way it did with AUKUS. The review of its Mutual Defense Treaty with the Philippines comes at a critical time and gives the US a chance not only to provide assurance to its treaty ally but also to cement and justify its position near China's periphery.

However, alliances and [partnerships such as the Quadrilateral Security Group](#) would do well not to appear overtly anti-Chinese. Increased pressure and antagonizing the Asian power could have debilitating effects to regional security by fueling more aggressive actions in contested areas such as the South China Sea and Taiwan, and economic retaliations that could affect not just one state but the whole region in general. Indeed, Australian Defence Minister Peter Dutton [described](#) the situation in the region as *"far more complex and far less predictable than at any time since the Second World War."*

An analysis by the [Foreign Policy](#) elaborates on the complexities by arguing that China is a "declining power". The article argues that a "declining power", suffering from the disappearance of the factors that led to its rise and an increase in nations opposing it, will be tempted to act on its interests *"before time runs out"*. As such, China may seek to act on Taiwan sooner rather than later indicating urgency on Beijing's part. There is likewise evidence of China's desperation. This month, China has once again [published military plans](#) for an invasion of Taiwan, increased its [live-fire exercises](#), launched [research ships](#), and is reported to have developed [electromagnetic pulse missiles](#) that could cripple major cities.

The Philippines and the larger region should be wary of issues within the Korean Peninsula. While the recent tests have not endangered states outside of East Asia, there is a possibility of North Korea dividing the US's attention in the Indo-Pacific or undermining partnerships. There is already a [strain](#) in US-South Korean relations on how to properly respond to North Korea's tests. It is imperative for the region and its allies to have a united focus.

As tensions rise in the region, the Philippines must work to continue the positive trends it saw this month to ensure its national security. While the [modernization](#) of the Philippine Navy and PCG [expansions](#) are beneficial, the Philippines must also enhance its cooperative ties with other states in the region, not just with the US.

One state the Philippines should prioritize and lean towards is Australia. The country is stepping up its middle power role and becoming more vocal and active in pursuing its defense and military interests in

the region. The Philippines welcomed an [Australian maritime task group](#) which Australian Ambassador Steven Robinson AO described as “*demonstrating the increasing mutual trust and cooperation*” between the armed forces of the two countries. At the [conclusion](#) of the Philippine-Australia Dialogue 2021, Amb. Robinson said that the two countries were negotiating on elevating the relationship towards Strategic Partnership. At that same forum, Palawan 2nd District Representative, Hon. Cyrille “Beng” Abueg-Zaldivar said that there are multiple dimensions for bilateral relations to cover beyond defense and security. Such endeavors include trade partnership, public health, cybersecurity, and others.

Indeed, the Philippines has many opportunities in different aspects of the maritime domain to improve, sustain, and defend: from [marine research fleets](#) to the foundations of [an international shipping line](#). Above all, the Philippines must continue to assert its sovereignty in the WPS. Ms. Drusila Esther Bayate, assistant director and marine expert at the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, said that it was [essential for Filipino fishers](#) to continue its presence in the WPS, partially as means of deterring foreign powers from exploiting the area. The complex web of alliances, managing relations with US and China, and the importance of the WPS to fishers and to overall national security will be part and parcel of key [election issues](#) in 2022 and the major elements to be considered for the Philippines’ long-term foreign policy and defense strategies.