

# **AUKUS: Analysis of its Claimed Objectives in Asia-Pacific**

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## **Abstract**

Australia, United Kingdom and United States on September 15, 2021, formed a multipurpose military alliance (AUKUS) aimed at enhancing collective security in the Indo-Pacific region. These countries, in a joint communiqué described the idea of AUKUS being guided by their; “enduring ideals, shared commitment to the international rule-based order, and resolve to deepen diplomatic security, and defense cooperation” in the Indo-Pacific region. Under this alliance, Australia will acquire long-range strike capabilities; for its air force, navy and army, and nuclear submarines and nuclear fuel from United States and United Kingdom. The NPT article 1 mandates the NNWS not to transfer or encourage development of nuclear weapons or other explosive devices by NNWS and hence this is a violation of that obligation. Similarly it is a violation of Article II that states NNWS would not seek such assistance. Nevertheless, the agreement to transfer US or UK nuclear submarine technology including highly enriched Uranium to Australia is termed by experts as an act of nuclear proliferation and a serious strategic concern for the region. This paper has done the frame analysis of the terms, used in the AUKUS communiqué, to bridge the gap between its frame of reference and frame of work.

## **Keywords**

AUKUS, Signal Security, Nuclear Submarine, Indo-Pacific, BRI, Nuclear Proliferation, Frame Semiotics

## **Introduction**

Although the nuclear factor of AUKUS will not have much strategic relevance in South Asia as it is already a nuclearized region however it will open doors for nuclearization of Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> AUKUS is being seen as a move to check expansion of Chinese economic and military influence. It is therefore likely to have an impact on South Asian

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countries, particularly Pakistan which is directly involved with Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>2</sup>

The American strategy to impede the rise of China is a loose proposition. Five Eyes and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), two forums which were already instituted have failed to stop expansion of Chinese influence in Southeast and South Asia. AUKUS would therefore just be another American attempt in desperation against China. Despite potential gains to the region the United States considers BRI a threat to US economic interests.<sup>3</sup> Regional military and foreign affairs experts including Lt Gen (ret) Asad Durrani, Ambassador Hassan Javed, Ambassador Massod Khalid, Maj Gen (ret) Zahid, Maj Gen Khalid Jafery and Ambassador Faisal Tirmizi, unanimously believe that the US is not ready to accept that it has lost the global narrative, soft power edge, hard power efficacy, technological lead and economic primacy etc. They also consider regional platforms like Five Eyes, Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and AUKUS as 'gimmicks' of a bygone era and would serve no useful or positive purpose. Those agreements would rather destabilize peaceful neighborhoods.

This paper aims to shed light on the AUKUS manifesto--- “enduring ideals” “shared commitment” “rule-based order” “deepen diplomacy” and “security and defense co-operation”. The senior military and foreign affairs experts of Pakistan were interviewed in reference to the above-mentioned terms. The paper provides a detailed frame analysis of these terms and establishes the argument that beneficiaries of AUKUS will be only its member states while regional countries would be its affectees. Therefore, AUKUS frame of reference contradicts its frame of work.

The Indo-Pacific is also known as the Indo–West Pacific or Indo–Pacific Asia. It comprises the tropical waters of the Indian Ocean, the western and central Pacific Ocean, and the seas connecting the two in the general area of Indonesia. In simple words, it is spread over all sea routes that connect China with the rest of the world.

Australia, UK and the US are the strongest naval powers in the world. Now presence of nuclear submarines in waters around China and along its trade routes will pose it serious security threats.

United States, Australia and Japan in 2007 formed the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD, also known as the Quad or QUAD) which was

called a “strategic dialogue” by the members states that also included India.<sup>4</sup>

The NATO states have another alliance in Indo-Pacific waters under the banner of “The Five Eyes”<sup>5</sup> which is an intelligence alliance, with Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States, its members. Minus Canada and New Zealand, other countries are also party to AUKUS.<sup>6</sup>

Ambassador (retd) Hassan Javed considers AUKUS<sup>7</sup> a truly Anglo-Saxon alliance as all three countries are not part of the Eurasian landmass, while UK is closest to Eurasia. They believe that AUKUS is formed to further consolidate NATO efforts to fight the Belt and Road Initiative. While China considers AUKUS as Asian NATO, as it includes NATO states

Signing of AUKUS, besides causing security concerns in regional countries, also has implications for nuclear proliferation. China, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, North Korea, Philippines and Russia have shown concerns over this alliance and presence of nuclear submarines in Indo-Pacific waters.<sup>8</sup> International nuclear weapons watchdogs, atomic scientists, and anti-nuclear groups call this development highly sensitive and dangerous. Atomic scholar Sébastien Philippe criticised AUKUS<sup>9</sup> and wrote “we can now expect the proliferation of very sensitive military nuclear technology in the coming years, with literally tons of new nuclear materials under loose or no international safeguards”.<sup>10</sup> Justin Katz of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace wrote that the nonproliferation implications of the AUKUS submarine deal are both negative and serious.<sup>11</sup> When Australia begins operating nuclear-powered submarines, it will become the first non-nuclear-weapon state to exploit a loophole that allows moving nuclear material, bypassing the inspection system of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Justin Katz says: “I have no real concerns that Australia will misuse this material itself, but I am concerned that this removal will set a damaging precedent. In the future, would-be proliferators could use naval reactor programs as cover for the development of nuclear weapons.”<sup>12</sup>

Australia and Brazil would be the first countries, without nuclear weapons, to have nuclear-powered submarines.<sup>13</sup> Concerns were raised that this may lead to increased risk of arms proliferation if other

countries follow the same approach. If other countries too choose to do so it would involve enriching Uranium for naval reactors and may also give them potential capability for developing materials for nuclear weapons, outside safeguards and regular inspections. This would not apply in the case of Brazil because the reactor will use low enriched Uranium at 7% concentration, much below the level needed for nuclear weapons.

US justifies its decision of offering nuclear submarines to Australia under Section 123 of the US Atomic Energy Act. Agreements under this act facilitate cooperation in other areas, such as technical exchanges, scientific research, and safeguards discussions etc. In conjunction with other nonproliferation tools, particularly the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), 123 agreements<sup>14</sup> help advance US nonproliferation principles. It establishes the legal framework for significant nuclear cooperation with other countries. In order for a partner to enter into 123 Agreement with the United States, that partner must adhere to a set of strong nonproliferation requirements. The US State Department is responsible for negotiating 123 Agreements, with the technical assistance and concurrence of NNSA<sup>15</sup> in consultation with the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission. As of Jan. 1, 2021, the United States has 24 such agreements in force that govern peaceful nuclear cooperation with 48 countries.

### **Frame Semiotics**

Frame Semiotics<sup>16</sup> deals with mechanisms of thought that structure meaning for us. The thought processes based is on linkage between and within the ideas.<sup>17</sup> Human mind builds the structure for the purpose of understanding and those structures are called frames.

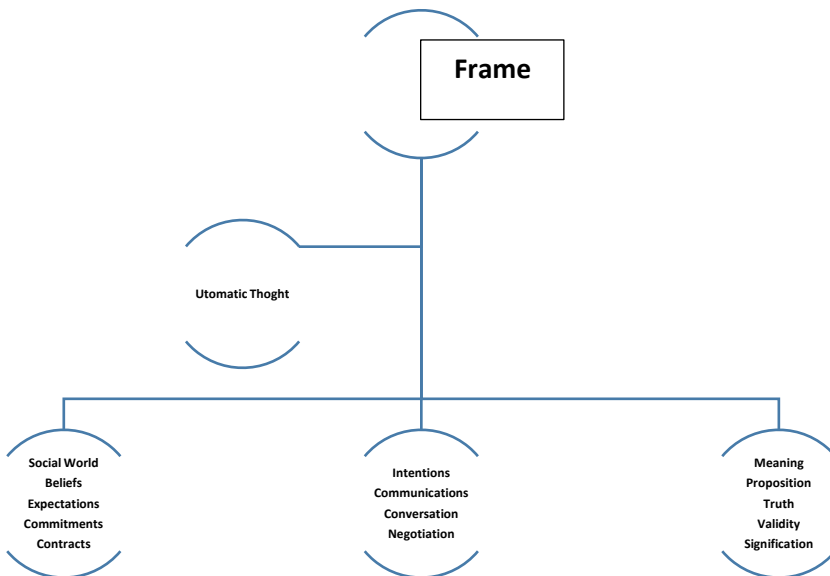
Frames include semantic roles, relations between roles, and relations to other frames. A Parliament frame for instance, can include the roles:<sup>18</sup> parliamentarians, their staff, journalists sitting in the press gallery, visitors, guards, receptionist, speaker's chamber, retiring room, library etc. Among the relations are specifications of what happens in a parliament, e.g., debating on national and international issues, tabling laws, discussion in standing committees etc.<sup>19</sup> These structures are physically realized in neural circuits in the brain. All our knowledge is a composite of frames, and every word is defined through a frame it

neurally activates. Our thinking and talking involves ‘framing’. Frames construct a system and a single word typically activates not only its defining frame but also much of the system its defining frame is part of.<sup>20</sup>

Many frame-circuits have direct connections to the emotional regions of the brain. Emotions are an inescapable part of normal thought process. Rationality too is linked with emotions.<sup>21</sup> All human logic is colored by emotions. It may sound strange that human reasoning, judgment, and decision making is always influenced by emotions.

Mission statements or AUKUS<sup>22</sup> manifesto is based on systems of frames including ideological language (statements, slogans etc) emotional exploitation, and greater good.

We are researching how frames facilitate in transferring required information such as the term ‘shared commitment’ and ‘enduring ideals’ etc. Why they have been used in AUKUS agreement and what purpose they are serving. Frames are always dependent on the existing system of frames and as mentioned before, work emotionally. Frames must be introduced in a communication system that allows for sufficient spread over the population (reach), sufficient repetition (rhetoric) and sufficient trust in the messengers (ethos).<sup>23</sup>



Words are defined in relation to frames, and hearing a word can activate its frame—and the frames within its system—in the brain of a receiver.<sup>24</sup> Words themselves are not frames, but under the right conditions, words can be chosen to activate desired frames. This is what effective communicators do. In order to communicate a complex idea, one must choose one's words carefully to activate the right frames so that the idea can be understood.<sup>25</sup> If the receiver has no such frames, then you have to choose your words with greater care to build those frames.

## **Data Collection**

This paper examines the terms used in AUKUS' agreement enduring ideals, shared commitment, rule-based order, deepen diplomacy and security and defense co-operation. Senior military and foreign affairs experts of Pakistan were interviewed with following pointers that established the argument that AKUAS is everything else but 'enduring ideals', 'shared commitment', 'rule-based order', 'deepen diplomacy' and 'security and defense co-operation'.

## **Interviews**

Each interview Prompter (question) is asked from all participants.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Question no 1***

#### **What is AUKUS in your opinion?**

Experts interviewed were of the view that AUKUS is a military alliance against China, and its formation coincided with the defeat of US forces in Afghanistan. It could be considered an Anglo-Saxon military alliance and outcome of isolation, frustration, and desperation of the United States. The AUKUS deal signifies that commercial interests have been given priority over transfer of nuclear technologies. Australia will pay for procuring submarine technology to feed US and British companies who will be outsourcing this technology. It is a myopic, short sighted step to achieve security objectives.

## **Question no 2**

### **Why was it needed when Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is already operational in Indo-Pacific water and how is it different than QSD?**

The difference between Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and AUKUS is evident from the word Dialogue. QSD is restricted to a dialogue, whereas AUKUS is a strategic alliance focusing on sharing of nuclear material with Australia which is a far serious business than having strategic dialogue. The fourth member in QSD is India, which does not enjoy level of relationship that exists between the three members of AUKUS.

This strategic alliance will have far reaching effects in the Indo Pacific region. AUKUS is driven by cracks in other platforms such as Quad and Five Eyes. It also shows that all countries in Asia Pacific are not on one page with US strategic objectives. Several countries are becoming frustrated in dealing with the consequences of the US actions. AUKUS is more to do with commercial deals directly benefitting the US and UK and entangling Australia in a long-term commitment to align with the US anti-China policy, and to be a watch guard in that part of the world. Moreover, under AUKUS' technological capability is being provided to Australia while QUAD has no such provision for transferring or providing technological capability to member states.

## **Question no 3**

**There are fears that under AUKUS US may proliferate nuclear material to Australia, and Australia may end up with making its own nuclear weapons.** This deal has the potential to encourage nuclear proliferation and misuse of article 123 of US laws, beyond repair. It can lead to nuclear proliferation if Australia too was given waiver like India in a so---called Civilian Nuclear Deal. AUKUS has set a precedent for other aspiring Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS) to advance their nuclear programs. AUKUS can potentially set in a chain reaction and make the world a much more dangerous place. It can tempt countries like Japan and Republic of Korea to acquire nuclear weapon technology.

Nuclear submarines fall in the category of military equipment and not covered by IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) safeguards. The three countries in AUKUS alliance have flouted the NPT spirit if not the

letter of the treaty. When the nuclear material is supplied to Australia, who will ensure verification of its legitimate use?

The US has shared its submarine technology with another state for the first time in 50 years. The nuclear submarines to be constructed under AUKUS agreement are much faster and harder to detect than conventionally powered fleets. They can stay submerged for months, shoot missiles at longer distances and carry more weapons. This would give Australia much leverage despite its claim of having no intention to obtain nuclear weapons. The implications of Australia becoming a nuclear power will be grave for New Zealand which has already said that it would ban Australia's submarines from entering its waters, in line with an existing policy on the presence of nuclear-powered submarines in its territorial waters. China considers AUKUS as a potential violation of the 1985 Treaty of Rarotonga that had declared the South Pacific a nuclear weapons free zone.

#### ***Question no 4***

#### **Do you think AUKUS targets Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?**

AUKUS is more likely to target China and BRI. The militarization of the Indian and Pacific Oceans can trigger military and diplomatic unrest in the region. AUKUS can be taken as a mechanism to act aggressively against China's trade routes in Indo Pacific. BRI has been in the American crosshairs for many years now. Its subversion by various means too has been afoot. AUKUS and QUAD are primarily a counter strategy against China. The increased militarization of Indian and the Pacific Oceans can be used to block free flow of trade and energy supplies of China directly or indirectly affecting BRI. That also explains why China is working to develop rail and road links with Asia, Africa, and Europe. Last year ten thousand cargo trains traversed between China and Europe.

#### ***Question no 5***

#### **Do you think it is an attempt to create NATO hegemony in Indo-Pacific waters and entire area surrounding China?**

ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asians Nations), even though having differences between member states, is a successful economic alliance. But now extra-regional military powers are entering this region that may



destabilize regional cooperation. AUKUS is an effort to create a NATO in the Asia Pacific to encircle China. It may be mentioned here that NATO itself is facing cracks, and America is losing its hold on this organization. NATO therefore is working on a new security doctrine to counter China's increasing influence in the Arctic, Europe and elsewhere. China is a rising power and many countries are joining hands with it. Old enmity between Russia and China (is over) and they are now looking towards making a bloc. To create hegemony under the prevailing international strategic environment may not be possible for the US despite its efforts.<sup>27</sup> Introducing nuclear capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region has been termed by China an aggressive act. China says that AUKUS is going to nuclearize this area and questions American involvement in the region.

### ***Question no 6***

#### **How would this Southeast Asian development impact regional peace of South Asia?**

The only impact it could have, would be creating tensions among ASEAN countries. Choosing between the US and China in a fractured Asia-Pacific will create imbalances in the region. Powerful navies operating in the region will fuel further uncertainty. It is also important to see that AUKUS is a naive effort to mark the US' presence just for the impact factor. Most affected will be Southeast Asia or ASEAN countries as they will lose strategic autonomy and their centrality. ASEAN members are not ready to choose between China and the US due to their strong economic relations with both. A fractured Asia- Pacific is however envisaged in future. In South Asia, India's cozying up with the US against China will create destabilization. When three most powerful navies of the world start surrounding a country then it has security implications. We have seen that China is not very keen on having wars. It is more inclined to solving its disputes with other states with patience, and peaceful means. India is playing a destabilizing role in this region by being a bully and a hegemon. It has opposed BRI and CPEC and has bad relations with other South Asian countries.

### ***Question no 7***

#### **What are the likely strategic implications of this military alliance on South Asia?**

It has significant strategic implications. Three powerful navies of the world will be operating in the area of interest to China, and Australia in future will have a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. There is a possibility that China may jump in and engage in an arms race resulting in further militarization of Indian Ocean. Such a development would deepen divisions in South Asia, that would cause more economic challenges for smaller countries of the region. India may also try to acquire more nuclear weapons and sophisticated arms and military technologies. In Asia-Pacific (Indo-Pacific) waters, Australia and India will be two countries having nuclear submarines and other countries would try to compete with them to have similar capability. AUKUS might not have a direct impact on the prevailing strategic situation in South Asia since India already has nuclear-powered submarines, and has leverage over Pakistan in strategic terms. However, this might impact India-US relations and overall peace in the Asia-Pacific region. Absence of India in AUKUS is already under discussion in Indian media. It is being postulated that India's role in Indo-Pacific has been marginalized by the US.

Another cause of concern would be the dynamics of India-Pakistan relationship. SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) countries will have to re-strategize and re-assess their diplomatic relations. These states will come under stress to side either with China or the US. For Pakistan, being an ally of China, enhancing its maritime power will be of utmost urgency in order to guard its interest against India.

### ***Question no 8***

#### **What are the implications of this alliance on South Asia's diplomacy?**

Diplomatically Pakistan's relation and cooperation with China will become more important. Pakistan will find it imperative to strengthen and broaden its relations with Russia, Iran and Central Asian republics. It is also important to mention that the US would never abandon Pakistan. Apart from this elaborate scheme of AUKUS where member states are solely connected through waters the US needs a land presence in the region. Only Pakistan, having land link with Afghanistan and through

Afghan soil to rest of Central Asia (states of former the Soviet Union), can provide this link.

## **Analysis**

Stated foundation of AUKUS alliance is based on five ideas. In their opening statements three heads of the member states emphasized that AUKUS alliance was based on enduring ideal, shared commitment, rules-based order, deepen diplomacy, and security/ defense cooperation. The paper has probed the contradictions in these stated ideas and actual manifestation of AUKUS. Its Frame of Reference contradicts the Frame of Work. Experts supplemented this hypothesis by elaborating AUKUS' Frame of Work. The Frame of Reference in terms of earlier mentioned five ideas are plausible because they are grounded in a frame of better society and secure living ideas.

As discussed before human mind understands ideas by framing them in some context, each frame generates an automatic thought, and automatic thoughts are based on beliefs, expectations, commitment, and social contracts (21). However, second and third layers of meaning deal with conscious thought processing. All the manipulation and propaganda are framed to deal with the automatic thought process. The analysis of the same frame on second and third more conscious levels reveals intentions, propositions, validity, and signification of the conversed and communicated frames.

An enduring ideal has a frame of acceptance and patience which automatically generates idea of compliance and active participation. However the second and third level analysis shows that the frame has been used in loose propositions without mentioning clear ideal (the ideals AUKUS is generalizing are very specific and applicable to few), and why human beings must endure to achieve that ideal. Experts are of the opinion that AUKAS' enduring ideal is nation specific, and constrained by limitations of geography. Moreover a set ideal is not universal or unipolar so a demand from everyone to suffer for achieving a goal which will benefit only a few is irrational. Endurance is a supreme human sacrifice that is an attribute of heroes who suffer for their fellow beings. AUKUS in Indo-pacific waters only means chaos as no other Indo-pacific country is sharing the AUKUS ideals except Australia.

Second frame which has been used to explain AUKUS is 'shared commitment'. If it is meant only for the AUKUS partners then it can assume its validity. On the other hand, if it includes the entire world, and expects it to share the commitment to the US hegemony, then it is again a loose ball. China and SAARC countries do not share any commitment to AUKUS agenda. A shared commitment is something that everyone in the relationship strives to honor, its underlying mechanism is if you agree with us you are a productive member of society<sup>28</sup> but failed to specify which society and what is the shared goal. Experts explained that the only shared goal of AUKUS is encircling China and extension of NATO into Indo-Pacific region. It is rather a suggestion to become part of something which is going to be of great harm. The idea of social role has been negotiated and exploited through this frame. The signifier is a productive social member which signified the adhered shared commitment leaving cognitive imprint of social bullying.

Rule based order is a framework of liberal political and economic rules, embodied in a network of international organizations and regulations. It, in fact, is a complicated term for a lay man. The automatic thought processing just involves two terms, rule and order. Rules are basic components of the frame to maintain order, mainly in social perspective. If AUKUS is claiming to be a rule based order, then whose rule and what order? Rules are human phenomena and human being are not infallible. Rules from antiquity are norms based on needs and desires. So, the point is how rule-based order can be flawless and universal? US is prone to using societal human aspect to promote its own agendas. Rules set by the powerful are always meant to maintain their hegemony, under the pretense of "if rule-based order is maintained peace will be ensured". It is synonymous with "whatever have been suggested by us is part of a social phenomenon"<sup>29</sup> and an attempt at promotion of personal, political, and military agendas. Experts unanimously discarded this frame and recorded their apprehensions about the likely militarization of the region. Political and military agendas are country specific, therefore their implementation cannot be universal, and any rule suggested by their agenda cannot be necessary for social peace and harmony in general.

Deepen Diplomacy is related to an activity, or skill of managing international relations. Once again US is playing the unipolar world card. In reality the US just intends to deepen its diplomatic relations with few

countries not all. Deep diplomatic ties with few selected countries will benefit only few and make vulnerable all other states. So, the frame 'deepen diplomacy' leads to square one, what goal and why all must suffer to achieve that. In order to become powerful, the sharing of power with chosen few is important. Are we among the chosen few? Will we reap the benefit of deepening diplomacy and what cost we are expected to pay for the sake of deepening our diplomatic ties? Answering these questions, experts have suggested that for SAARC region, the main battle ground of AUKUS, it is a chaotic choice between US and China. The offer of shared commitment via diplomacy will lead to extremely ambiguous and un-confirmed diplomatic relationships and bullying the developing countries to choose sides can be suicidal for economies surviving on ventilators.

Security and defense cooperation is a contract between/among two or many for ensuring their collective security. As South Asian countries are not part of AUKUS so there is no scope for having their say in any process. But their compliance and cooperation is expected. In other words, the US wants support from regional countries without including them and without offering them anything in return. They are expected to keep silent or support US or otherwise US would consider them partners of China.

## **Discussion**

The United States has a long history of coining attractive and positive terminologies for executing its designs. A long list of such words include 'Embedded reporting', 'Operation Enduring Freedom', 'Operation Red Dawn', 'Operation Rolling Thunder', 'Operation Overload', 'Operation Urgent Fury', 'Operation Desert Storm', 'Operation Wrath of God', 'Operation Magic Carpet' etc. The reality of all the above-mentioned phrases were altogether contrary to the automatic thoughts they generated.

Experts of communication philosophy may explain why the diction used by the United States mostly has nothing to do with the actual agendas or the objectives.<sup>30</sup> Therefore it is imperative for students and practitioners of semiotic and communication philosophy to explore and dissect any

terminology used by the United States for any of its projects to fathom the underlying and underplaying realities.

For example, does using “Enduring Ideal” really mean that the US wishes to execute some ideas more forcefully for the benefit of humanity? And what actually are enduring ideals for the US? Similarly ‘Shared Commitment’ does not represent something that everyone in the relationship strives to honor. It seems more like an imposition to become party to an agenda which only serves the interest of the USA. So the frame used here too is deceptive and misleading. The experts were of the view that the only shared commitment behind AUKAS agreement is to block Chinese trade routes.

Automatic Thought generated by beautifully crafted terminologies used in AUKUS manifesto, is positive. These words engender thought in individuals that an ideal must be achieved through endurance for a better cause and greater good of humanity. US political frames play with cognitive faculties such as beliefs, expectations, commitments, and contracts which manifest a social phenomenon and a civic society. Words like shared commitment, rule-based order, deepen diplomacy, security, and Defense Cooperation look positive and pragmatic when put into the frame of better society and humanity, however close analysis shows otherwise. This is a usual mechanism to establish US hegemony and control in a certain region as it did in Afghanistan, Iraq Libya, etc.

AUKUS was reviewed in the light of an official statement provided by its member states and opinions of Pakistani experts from the fields of military and foreign affairs. Semiotic rules were also used to dissect claims mentioned in the statement.

The results of this exercise indicates that the US has given positive and feel good colors to AUKUS that has altogether different objectives than what the words communicate. The result of research indicates that the purpose of AUKUS is to create US hegemony in the Asia Pacific and AUKUS framework will be available for blocking Chinese trade routes.

UC, Berkeley, professor George Lakoff believes language always comes with what is called "framing." Every word is defined relative to a conceptual framework. He indicates that United States political parties and the system are backed by researches over coining dictions, and this work is mostly done by Think Tanks.<sup>31</sup>

Usage of carefully selected words/phrases by the US leadership and policy makers are mostly backed by framing of what they wish to achieve.<sup>32</sup> While a simple reader and journalist takes phrases used by them as political statements but these are more than mere political statements. They have deeper meanings and are crafted for future manipulation of words/phrase and events.

## Endnotes

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