

4.1 – Background Press Call on AUKUS

September 15, 2021

This background press call, a transcript of which was later published by the White House, was held the afternoon before U.S. President Biden, UK Prime Minister Johnson, and Australian Prime Minister Morrison jointly announced the creation of the trilateral security pact, AUKUS. It discusses the motivations behind the formation of the pact, the various AUKUS initiatives and their roles in upgrading capabilities to strengthen deterrence in the region, as well as each country's commitment to safeguarding the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region.

BRIEFING ROOM

Background Press Call on AUKUS

SEPTEMBER 15, 2021 • PRESS BRIEFINGS

Via Teleconference

9:03 A.M. EDT

MODERATOR: Hi, everyone. Thanks for joining us this morning. Just to kick us off with some ground rules at the top: To reiterate, this call is on background. It will be attributed to “senior administration officials.” The contents of this call are embargoed until 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time. And by joining this call, you are hereby agreeing to these ground rules. Again, the contents are embargoed until 5:00 p.m. Eastern.

Now, to quickly get into the topic of what we are discussing today: As you know, at 5:00 p.m., President Biden will be delivering remarks. He will be delivering remarks alongside Prime Minister Morrison of Australia and Prime Minister Johnson of the UK, and they will be announcing the creation of a new trilateral security partnership between our three nations focused on the Indo-Pacific region.

The partnership is named AUKUS — that is A-U-K-U-S. So the purpose of this briefing today is to discuss this new initiative. We have two senior administration officials. For your awareness, the speakers today are [senior administration official] and [senior administration official]. Hereafter, they will be referred to as “senior administration officials.”

So, with that, I will turn it over to our first briefer for some brief opening remarks. Over to you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thank you, and good morning to everyone. So as [senior administration official] indicated, the three leaders of our maritime democracies will, this evening or later today, announce the formation of a new trilateral security partnership. And AUKUS obviously represents Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States.

I think this is an historic announcement. It reflects the Biden administration’s determination to build stronger partnerships to sustain peace and stability across the entire Indo-Pacific

region. This new architecture is really about deepening cooperation on a range of defense capabilities for the 21st century.

And again, these relationships with Great Britain and Australia are time tested — our oldest allies, generally. This is designed not only to strengthen our capabilities in the Indo-Pacific but to link Europe, and particularly Great Britain, more closely with our strategic pursuits in the region as a whole.

I think, you know, Great Britain is very focused on the concept of “global Britain,” and their tilt is about engaging much more deeply with the Indo-Pacific, and this is a down payment on that effort.

This new architecture, this new alignment is about collaborating on joint capabilities and pursuing deeper interoperability. And you will see several things: One, we will announce a new architecture of meetings and engagements among our senior defense and foreign policy officials to share perspectives, to align views. But we will also announce efforts to spur cooperation across many new and emerging arenas — cyber; AI — particularly applied AI; quantum technologies; and some undersea capabilities as well.

We'll also work to sustain and deepen information and technology sharing, and I think you're going to see a much more dedicated effort to pursue integration of security and defense-related science, technology, and industrial bases, and supply chains. This will be a sustained effort over many years to see how we can marry and merge some of our independent and individual capabilities into greater trilateral engagement as we go forward.

I just want to underscore, just generally: Obviously, there are no better allies than the United Kingdom and Australia. This is about strengthening our alliances and working together to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

We undertake this effort as part of a larger constellation of steps, including stronger bilateral partnerships with our traditional security partners in Asia — Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines — and also stronger engagement with

new partners like India, Vietnam, and new formations like the Quad. And, as you know, the Quad will be held in person for this first time next week.

But for AUKUS, in addition to this set of strategic and defense-related steps, our first initiative as part of AUKUS is the three countries will announce, later today, a shared ambition to support Australia's desire to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. And we will launch a

trilateral effort of 18 months, which will involve teams — technical and strategic and navy teams — from all three countries to identify the optimal pathway of delivery of this capability.

And I think, as you know, the only country that the United States has shared, traditionally, this kind of nuclear technology for propulsion is Great Britain, and that arrangement dates back to 1958.

We are adding — this is a unique set of circumstances — Australia to that deep partnership to explore the best ways for Australia to pursue nuclear-powered submarines.

I do want to underscore that this will give Australia the capability for their submarines to basically — to deploy for longer periods. They're quieter. They're much more capable. They will allow us to sustain and to improve deterrence across the Indo-Pacific.

As part of that, we will work closely on efforts to ensure the best practices with respect to nuclear stewardship. I think you will see much deeper interoperability among our navies and our nuclear infrastructure people to ensure that our countries are working very closely together.

I just want to underscore that this is a fundamental decision — fundamental — that binds decisively Australia to the United States and Great Britain for generations.

This is the biggest strategic step that Australia has taken in generations. And it is noteworthy that it comes here during the 70th anniversary of ANZUS. So it's a substantial strategic alignment for Australia, building on a deep partnership with both countries.

I do want to underscore that the Biden administration remains deeply committed to American leadership and nonproliferation. This is nuclear propulsion. Australia has no intention of pursuing nuclear weapons. And Australia is, in fact, a leader in all nonproliferation efforts in the NPT and elsewhere.

Australia, again, does not seek and will not seek nuclear weapons; this is about nuclear-powered submarines. But it's a very important initiative that will basically set us on a new course of trilateral cooperation into the 21st century.

I'm going to ask my colleague if he'd like to jump in quickly, and then we will open it up for your questions. Thank you very much.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks very much. I'll just follow up on what my colleague said about nonproliferation by adding that this partnership is, in many ways, possible

because of Australia's longstanding and demonstrated commitment to nuclear nonproliferation.

The partnership is going to be taken fully consistent with our respective nonproliferation obligations over the next 18 months during this consultation period.

Our shared objective is to maintain the strength of the nonproliferation regime and Australia's exemplary nonproliferation credentials. That will be central to the discussion. And, you know, as we embark on the effort for the next 18 months, we will be engaged fully with the IAEA.

So I'll stop there. I think we're ready now to turn to questions.

Q Hi. Thanks very much for doing this. [Senior administration official], I guess this question is mostly to you: What will this nuclear submarine technology allow Australia to do in the Indo-Pacific with regard to China? I imagine it makes Australia — Australian subs much more on a par with Chinese subs and other nuclear-powered technology, but if you could talk about that direct linkage please.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So, thank you for the question. I would say, just at a general level, nuclear-powered submarines really maintain superior characteristics of stealth and speed, maneuverability, survivability, and really substantial endurance.

And I think the challenge with conventionally powered submarines is that you have to surface regularly, the range is limited.

And I think what we're seeing in the Indo-Pacific region is a — is a set of circumstances where capabilities are more advanced. This allows Australia to play at a much higher level and to augment American capabilities that will be similar. And these — this is about maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

I would just underscore: That's the mission that we've undertaken for decades. We are determined to continue that effort, and I think Australia has basically indicated that they want to ensure that they're playing a strategic role in that overall effort.

Q Hi. Thank you. Thank you very much for this. I wanted you to tell us a little bit about how the UK is going to fit into this. I mean, are we going to be expecting to see more UK patrols? Will that involve British submarines, and what type of submarines might those be?

And on the (inaudible), we've heard that there might be some agreement to upgrade air cooperation that could possibly see U.S. bombers and fighters accessing Australian airfields in

the future. Is this part of the arrangement?

And also, we've heard maybe there could be an agreement about Australia producing its own munitions domestically.

Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thank you. Those are — those are good, detailed questions. Let me just take — give you as much clarity as I can.

I think, as you know, the ministers from Australia are meeting with their counterparts here in Washington today and tomorrow. They will have more to say about how the United States and Australia intend to work together on a range of issues, both in terms of policy coordination and interoperability. And I'll leave it to them to specify any next steps with respect to American engagement directly with Australia.

I think, with respect to Great Britain, you have just seen the substantial deployment of British forces throughout the Indo-Pacific — very successful deployments of the aircraft carrier in supporting ships, lots of valuable port engagements.

Our strategic discussions — and I just want to underscore that this AUKUS negotiation transcended several months of very deep, very high-level engagements with both our military commands, our political leadership, and the people closest to our leaders in order to chart a common path on the way forward.

And I think what we heard in all those conversations is a desire for Great Britain to substantially step up its game in the Indo-Pacific. I think the process of this next 18 months is to help chart out what exactly that means.

Obviously, Great Britain has enormous responsibilities and interests in Europe and in the Middle East, but it also has deep historical ties to Asia. I think they've indicated to us that they do want to do more going forward, and I think this is a clear and decisive next step in that arena.

I do want to say that these are three equal partners. Great Britain has been a very strong strategic leader in this effort. They have, in many respects, helped mediate and engage on all the critical issues. And they are determined to play their role going forward.

Q Hi. Thank you for doing this, [senior administration official]. So, my question is — was related to China, but you sort of answered that in the first question.

President Biden talked about the EU Allies' engagement with Indo-Pacific partners, and you just mentioned that as well. This might be a little bit too early to talk about that, but will we see extension of this trilateral framework in the future? You know, will we include New Zealand in this framework and France and other countries that might also be interested to have a say in the Indo-Pacific region and the United States may have interests there? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah. I do want to underscore: We see this as a very rare engagement between Australia, Great Britain, and the United States.

We've done this only once before, as I indicated. That was almost 70 years ago with Great Britain. And, in fact, one of the reasons why we've done this with Australia with Great Britain is because of the experience, lessons learned, and history associated with this program, which will be extremely valuable in the engagement with Australia.

This technology is extremely sensitive. This is, frankly, an exception to our policy in many respects. I do not anticipate that this will be undertaken in other circumstances going forward. We view this as a one-off.

We do believe that this is complementary to other forms of security and political engagement in the region. I think the leaders of Australia and Great Britain will seek to underscore that this is meant to complement ongoing and existing security and political partnerships, and it's meant to send a message of reassurance and a determination to maintain a strong deterrent stance into the 21st century.

Thanks.

Q Thank you.

Q (Inaudible.) Can you just explain exactly how this is going to look, how it's going to work at 5:00 p.m., given the nature of who you said is going to announce it?

And then, my big question, if you could — just be explicit: What is the message you are sending to China today?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So, let me just say, today, there will be a virtual session that will be live between the three leaders. We'll kick it off with a little opening, and then each of the leaders will lay out specifically what they want to accomplish, what their ambitions are, and I think it will be an opportunity for each of them to lay out their vision for

the future and indicate the launch of this 18-month effort and how that effort to basically put the architecture around this ambitious partnership in place.

I do want to just underscore, very clearly: This partnership is not aimed or about any one country; it's about advancing our strategic interests, upholding the international rules-based order, and promoting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

And I would just say that this — I would view this in context of our ongoing efforts — bipartisan efforts, over decades, to continue to play this critical role. The most dynamic, commercial, economic, most vibrant region in the world is the Indo-Pacific, but that vibrancy, that dynamism rests on confidence and peace and stability.

The United States has been the bedrock on that effort, and I think what this partnership and alignment seeks to underscore is that we want to continue to help play that role, but that we want to play it not only individually with a strong American commitment, but in partnership with other countries as well.

And so, you're going to see a number of things. Again, you've seen very strong statements and engagements with Japan and South Korea and the Philippines to date; new engagements with countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, and India.

And then, next week, you'll hear a discussion between leaders about how the Quad can deal with critical issues like the pandemic and infrastructure. This is all about developing an integrated, effective web of engagement about sustaining the operating system of Asia, the rules-based order that has been so good for all of us over these many years, and we hope into the future.

Q Hi, everyone. How soon do you think Australia will actually be able to field nuclear submarines? And how does this factor into their most recent order for new attack submarines? Is this going to retrofit the project that's already underway, modify that? You know, what is the timeline and process?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So, look, I'm going to let Australia answer questions about their arrangement with France for conventional submarines. I think that will be dealt with in the next couple of days. I would view this as a unique endeavor that involves the three countries that we've laid out more clearly.

I do want to just underscore that it's very hard to overestimate how challenging and how important this endeavor will be. Australia does not have a nuclear domestic infrastructure.

They have made a major commitment to go in this direction. This will be a sustained effort over years.

And everything that we've seen from Australia indicates that they're determined to proceed on this course, and we have high confidence — complete confidence — that they will be effective in this pursuit. But it will be lengthy and it will be detailed and it will be substantial.

Q Thank you so much for doing this call. I understand that you're saying that this move is — I understand that you're saying that this move is not about any one country. But, obviously, I would think that these are — these are submarines. This is about national security, when you're talking about enforcing rules and, you know, a rules-based order, and talking about having submarines that have more stealth capabilities.

That clearly seems like this is about security matters and this is about military threat. And it would seem like the only country that is not involved would be China. So, I guess, can you talk more about — it seems like this is a military move aimed at China. How can it not be?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Look, I have nothing further to add than what I've said. This is not aimed at any one country. This is about a larger effort to sustain the fabric of engagement and deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.

We have a history of innovation, upgrading capabilities. I would urge you to look at it in this context. And I would simply say that I think one of the things that the United States has done most effectively in the Indo-Pacific is to secure peace and stability and to be the ultimate guarantor of that rules-based order.

I think it'd be fair to say, over the last several years, there have been questions: Does the United States still have the stomach? Do we have the wit and wisdom that we want to continue to play that role?

What President Biden is saying with this initiative is: Count us in. We are all in for a deeper, sustained commitment to the Indo-Pacific, and we recognize that our — one of our critical roles is indeed the maintenance of peace and stability there.

Q Hi, thanks for doing this. Can you say if President Biden discussed this new partnership with President Xi on their call earlier this week?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Not in any specific terms, but President Biden did underscore our determination to play a strong, strong role in the Indo-Pacific. He reviewed some of the efforts that we've taken to date — engagements in Europe and the like.

I do want to just underscore that this effort, for obvious reasons — this is a huge deal in Australia — was undertaken with a high degree of discretion. And indeed, you know, only today we are briefing and rolling out our engagements with a variety of leaders accordingly.

We will debrief all interested parties and explain clearly what we — what our intentions are in the Indo-Pacific, in Europe, international organizations like the IAEA and others.

This is the intent to do this in a very straightforward, transparent way. This is a partnership that we're proud of, that we believe is reassuring and will have a positive impact on the Indo-Pacific.

MODERATOR: On that note, just a reminder, this call was on background, attributed to “senior administration officials,” and the contents are embargoed until 5:00 p.m. Eastern time.

Thank you all.

9:29 A.M. EDT