

3.2 – The AUKUS Agreement – House of Commons Library

October 11, 2021

This publication of the House of Commons Library provides a holistic summary of major issues surrounding the AUKUS agreement from the UK perspective. Its early assessment of international reactions is particularly helpful for understanding the geopolitical positioning of key countries in the region. It also provides a brief assessment of the significance of the partnership to each country and one of the earliest assessments of the long-term implications for non-proliferation. Finally, the document provides several early selections for further reading.

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11 October 2021

The AUKUS agreement

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Summary

In September 2021 the UK, Australia and the United States announced a new security partnership called AUKUS. The surprise agreement will see the three countries collaborate on new nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy and work together on areas such as cyber and artificial intelligence. The three countries said the agreement “will help sustain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.”¹ For the UK, it is a clear reflection of the UK’s tilt to the Indo-Pacific, articulated in the Integrated Review of security, defence and foreign policy.

However, there has been mixed reaction from the region, with some believing it will help address the military imbalance against China, while others fear it could spark an arms race or heighten the risk of conflict. And while the submarines are to be nuclear-powered, not nuclear-armed, the agreement has prompted much discussion of the effect it will have on nuclear non-proliferation efforts.

France, who will lose a multibillion contract to build new submarines for Australia, as a result of AUKUS, described the announcement as a “stab in the back”.

This paper explores some of potential implications of AUKUS, mindful that there are still many details of the agreement to come.

¹ [“UK, US and Australia launch new security partnership”](#), Gov.uk, 15 September 2021

1

The announcement of AUKUS

On 15 September 2021 Prime Minister Boris Johnson, US President Joseph Biden and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison [issued a joint statement](#) announcing the creation of an “enhanced trilateral security partnership” called AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States).²

A major part of the agreement is for the three countries to begin consultations to help Australia acquire nuclear-powered (not nuclear-armed) submarines. The initial scoping phase for this part of the agreement will take 18 months:

The development of Australia’s nuclear-powered submarines would be a joint endeavour between the three nations, with a focus on interoperability, commonality, and mutual benefit.³

The statement also announces plans for further collaboration to “enhance our joint capabilities and interoperability.” These will initially focus on cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and additional undersea capabilities.

1 Official announcements

- [UK Government](#) and [Prime Minister’s oral statement to the House](#)
- [Australian Government](#)
- [US Government](#) and [White House press briefing](#)

² [“UK, US and Australia launch new security partnership”](#), Gov.uk, 15 September 2021

³ [“UK, US and Australia launch new security partnership”](#), Gov.uk, 15 September 2021

2 International reaction

The announcement was unexpected. Initial reaction was therefore just as much focused on the surprise about the announcement as it was about the content of the agreement.⁴

2.1 Response from Indo-Pacific nations

There was a mixed reaction from the countries in the Indo-Pacific.

China

For China, AUKUS “has seriously undermined regional peace and stability”. China’s foreign ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, went on to say that the announcement has “intensified the arms race and undermined international non-proliferation efforts.” China accused the three countries of double standards over nuclear non-proliferation and of holding on to a “Cold War mentality.”⁵

A spokesperson for China’s London Embassy urged the UK “to take concrete actions to uphold the international nuclear non-proliferation regime, and avoid any action that would increase tension in the Asia Pacific region or compromise the peace and stability in the region.”⁶

Malaysia and Indonesia

Fears that this agreement will spark an arms race in the region, potentially heightening the risk of conflict, were also raised by Indonesia and Malaysia. Malaysia’s Prime Minister, Ismail Sabri Yaakob, said the project could “provoke other powers to take more aggressive action in this region, especially in the South China Sea.”⁷ The Indonesian government issued a statement saying that it viewed the pact “cautiously” and was “deeply

⁴ The Times recounts the secrecy surrounding negotiations in “[Like a scene from *le Carré*: how the nuclear submarine pact was No 10’s biggest secret](#)”, 18 September 2021

⁵ “[Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference](#)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 16 September 2021

⁶ Embassy of the People’s Republic of China, “Embassy Spokesperson’s Remarks on the Newly-announced Military Partnership between UK, US and Australia”, 18 September 2021. The Embassy have also written two articles on AUKUS: “[Wang Yi: U.S.-Britain-Australia Nuclear Submarine Cooperation Poses Three Hidden Dangers](#)”, 28 September 2021 and “[Wang Yi: U.S.-Britain-Australia Nuclear Submarine Cooperation Causes Five Harms to the Region](#)” 29 September 2021.

⁷ “[Australia seeks to ally Southeast Asian concerns over AUKUS nuclear submarine deal](#)”, ABC News, 20 September 2021

concerned over the continuing arms race and power projection in the region.”⁸

The Philippines

Others, however, were more welcoming. The Philippines Foreign Secretary said AUKUS addresses the military “imbalance” in Southeast Asia, though he refrained from directly naming any specific country as being responsible for this imbalance. Teodoro Locsin Jr said there is an imbalance in the forces available to ASEAN member states and “the enhancement of a near abroad ally’s ability to project power should restore and keep the balance rather than destabilize it.”⁹

Southeast Asia dynamics

Sebastian Strangio, the Southeast Asia editor of The Diplomat, says there are real fears among Southeast Asian states that their region will be the frontline of any future US/China conflict. He explains why they have a different view of China’s actions:

At a deeper level, Southeast Asian and American perceptions diverge to varying degrees on the question of exactly what threat China poses. While it fears a future of Chinese hegemony, the region has little appetite for the predominant U.S. view of its competition with China, as part of a global battle between democracy and authoritarianism, a framing that was echoed in the AUKUS announcement.¹⁰

Japan

Japan has also welcomed the creation of AUKUS. Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi said it strengthens engagement in the region.¹¹ Professor Tetsuo Kotani of Meikai University told the Defence Committee that while Japan understood the strategic implication for the decision, it was unfortunate the three countries did not deal with France in a different way, suggesting any resulting divisions may encourage China.¹²

⁸ [“Statement on Australia’s Nuclear-powered Submarines Program”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 17 September 2021.

⁹ [“Philippines throws support behind AUKUS pact”](#), Benar News, 21 September 2021

¹⁰ [“What Does the New AUKUS Alliance Mean for Southeast Asia?”](#), The Diplomat, 17 September 2021. See also [“Why is southeast Asia so concerned about AUKUS and Australia’s plans for nuclear submarines?”](#), The Conversation, 20 September 2021

¹¹ [“Press Conference by Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21 September 2021

¹² Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: The Navy: purpose and procurement](#), HC 168 2021-22, 21 September 2021 q109

South and North Korea

On 20 September 2021 South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Boris Johnson discussed the AUKUS agreement during a meeting of the UN General Assembly. According to presidential spokeswoman Park Kyung-mee, the Prime Minister told President Moon that "AUKUS will not cause any regional problems," and Mr Moon responded, "I hope AUKUS will contribute to regional peace and prosperity." The remarks were interpreted as Moon taking a neutral stance on the pact.¹³

The South Korean military is said to want to develop nuclear-powered submarines¹⁴, and President Moon advocated for the country developing the technology in his 2017 election campaign. It was reported that in 2020 South Korea approached the US for its cooperation in supplying nuclear fuel, but the request was refused.¹⁵

A North Korean Foreign Ministry official condemned the deal saying it would "upset the strategic balance in the Asia-Pacific region". They further warned "these are extremely undesirable and dangerous acts which will upset the strategic balance in the Asia-Pacific region and trigger off a chain of nuclear arms race".¹⁶ The remarks came a week after North Korea carried out two major weapons tests - that of a long-range cruise missile and a ballistic missile.

India

Observing Delhi's relative silence about AUKUS, Tanvi Madan of the US-based Brookings Institution, says AUKUS is likely to be seen positively by India. Madan says India has deep concerns about Chinese actions and intentions, and AUKUS signals a reaffirmation of its partner nations' commitment to the region.¹⁷

Other regional groupings

The US and Australia directly addressed concerns about AUKUS's impact on ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and the Quad (US, India, Australia and Japan) in a joint statement on 17 September. The two countries reaffirmed their commitment to "Southeast Asia, ASEAN centrality, and

¹³ "[AUKUS comes as pressure on Seoul to join anti-China campaign](#)", The Korea Times, 23 September 2021.

¹⁴ It has recently launched a new class of conventional-powered submarines able to launch long-range ballistic missiles also, see "[AUKUS's implications for Australia-South Korea defence collaboration](#)", The Strategist, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, B Paterson, 29 September 2021.

¹⁵ "[AUKUS comes as pressure on Seoul to join anti-China campaign](#)", The Korea Times, 23 September 2021.

¹⁶ "[Aukus could trigger a 'nuclear arms race'](#)", says North Korea", BBC News, 20 September 2021.

¹⁷ "[India, the Quad and AUKUS](#)", Lawfare blog, 24 September 2021

ASEAN-led architecture” and to “working through the Quad to support Indo-Pacific partners to respond to the defining challenges of our time.”¹⁸

The Quad has been given more prominence since President Biden took office; he hosted the first in-person [leaders’ summit in Washington](#) a few days after announcing AUKUS. Covid and global health, improving regional infrastructure and education were the focus of that summit rather than security issues.¹⁹

The UK and Australia also participate in the Five Power Defence Arrangements, along with Malaysia, Singapore and New Zealand. Agreed in 1971 after the withdrawal of British forces from Malaysia and Singapore, it commits the five members to consult in the event of an external attack on either Malaysia or Singapore. There is no specific commitment for military intervention in such an event.

The UK, Australia and the US are part of the Five Eyes Intelligence network, alongside New Zealand and Canada. In 2018 six Southeast Asian countries [launched their own equivalent network](#), Our Eyes, to share intelligence on militant and extremist groups.

2.2

France says AUKUS is a “stab in the back”

The French reaction was one of fury. France’s Foreign Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, described the AUKUS deal as a “stab in the back.”²⁰ Mr Le Drian said the announcement constitutes “unacceptable behaviour among allies and partners”, and France withdrew its ambassadors from Washington and Canberra in response.²¹ France’s defence minister, Florence Parly, also cancelled a planned meeting with UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace. Asked why France had not recalled its ambassador to the UK, Le Drian said UK’s role in the agreement was “opportunistic” and described the country as “the fifth wheel on the wagon”.²²

Naval Group, the French company that was contracted to build Australia’s 12 conventional-powered submarines in a deal worth US \$36.2 billion, is majority owned by the French state.²³ The loss of the deal, therefore, has direct financial consequences for the French Government. Naval Group’s Chief

¹⁸ [“The Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations Joint Statement: An Unbreakable Alliance for Peace and Prosperity”](#), Australian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 17 September 2021

¹⁹ A helpful explanation of the Quad can be found in “Explainer: What exactly is the Quad and what’s on the agenda for their Washington summit?” by Ian Hall, *The Conversation*, 22 September 2021

²⁰ [“‘Stab in the back’: French fury as Australia scraps submarine deal”](#), *the Guardian*, 16 September 2021

²¹ [“France recalls its ambassadors to the US and Australia over new national security partnership”](#), CNN, 18 September 2021

²² [“Aukus: France’s ambassador recall is ‘tip of the iceberg’, say analysts”](#), *The Guardian*, 18 September

²³ Thales, the French defence company owns another 35%, [“Naval Group vows to claw back millions for cancelled submarine deal”](#), *Financial Times*, 26 September 2021.

Executive has said that they will seek repayment from Australia of “every cost that we incurred and every cost related to the demobilisation”.²⁴

Macron and Biden talk

A week after the deal was announced, President Biden and President Macron held discussions over the phone. A [read out](#) after the call stated “The two leaders agreed that the situation would have benefited from open consultations among allies on matters of strategic interest to France and our European partners”. They also committed to “open a process of in-depth consultations”, to try and ensure confidence.²⁵

Asked a few weeks after the call if he was now confident that Mr Biden recognised France’s importance as an ally, Mr Macron replied “we will see.”²⁶

Le Drian gives further perspective

Giving evidence to the Sénat’s defence committee, a few weeks after the AUKUS deal was announced, Mr Le Drian gave further details of how France was told about the breaking of the Franco-Australian contract.

He claimed that he and the Naval Group had both received letters on 15 September “from the Australian ministry of defence that said everything is OK let’s continue.” The French foreign minister said this suggested “someone lied”. He added: “Something doesn’t add up and we don’t know what.”²⁷

The foreign minister repeated several times that the AUKUS deal represented a “total loss of sovereignty” for Australia. He said the US’ strategy in the Indo-Pacific was based on “confrontation, even military confrontation”, and said France wanted to work with “other actors in the Indo-Pacific” to combat Chinese expansion in the region.

He stated that France still did not know what role the UK would play in the project. On UK-France relations he said “the ball is in the British camp. If they want to go forward confidence needs to be rebuilt.”

Perhaps of more longer-term interest is the potential competition between the UK and France for influence, given the UK’s stated ambition to be the “European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific.”²⁸

2 France and the Indo-Pacific

France has the most significant presence in the Indo-Pacific region of any European country. It has several territories in the region including New Caledonia and French Polynesia, which are home to 1.6 million French citizens²⁹, and significant defence assets.³⁰ Under President Macron, the Indo-

Pacific has [risen in importance](#) in France's foreign and defence policy. France in the last several years [sold frigates to Malaysia](#), and recently [secured a major arms deal](#) with India to supply 36 Rafale fighter aircraft.

In 2019 it released a defence strategy focused on the region, that said "France needs to reaffirm its strategic autonomy" in the region and pledged to deepen relations with Australia further and build on the submarine programme to develop "armament cooperation".³¹ The breaking of the French-Australian contract jeopardises these plans.

While France is said to be particularly concerned by China's "assertive attitude" in the region, it sees itself as a "mediating, inclusive and stabilizing power", and has preferred to distance itself from US-China tensions in order to leave it more room for diplomatic manoeuvre.³² Part of France's displeasure from the AUKUS deal also stems from a view that it will ramp up those tensions.

2.3

EU reaction

EU Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, demanded in an interview that Australia explain its actions, saying "one of our member states has been treated in a way that is not acceptable, so we want to know what happened and why."³³

²⁴ "[Naval Group vows to claw back millions for cancelled submarine deal](#)", Financial Times, 26 September 2021.

²⁵ "[Joint Statement on the Phone Call between President Biden and President Macron](#)", The White House, 22 September 2021.

²⁶ "[Macron on French-US alliance: 'We will see'](#)", Politico, 5 October 2021.

²⁷ "['Someone lied': French foreign minister accuses Australia of submarine betrayal in latest broadside](#)", The Guardian, 30 September 2021.

²⁸ [Integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy](#), CP 403, 16 March 2021. Library papers analysing the review and the related defence command paper are collated on the Library's website: [Integrated Review 2021](#).

²⁹ French overseas territories include seven Regions, Departments and Communities: Mayotte, La Reunion, the French Southern and Antarctic territories, New Caledonia, Wallis & Futuna, and French Polynesia, from "[France's defence strategy in the Indo-Pacific](#)", Ministère des Armées, 2019.

³⁰ Its permanent-based military assets are composed of 7,000 defence personnel, 15 warships and 38 aircraft: "[French Joint Commander for Asia-Pacific Outlines Paris' Indo-Pacific Defense Plans](#)", The Diplomat, 13 April 2021

³¹ "[France's defence strategy in the Indo-Pacific](#)", Ministère des Armées, 2019, page 17.

³² "France: A Bridge between Europe and the Indo-Pacific?", Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 1 April 2021.

³³ "[Aukus row: EU officials demand apology from Australia over France's treatment before trade talks](#)", The Guardian, 21 September 2021.

Josep Borrell Fontelles, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, wrote that:

[R]eactions were not just about a deal on submarines that did not go through, but about the wider ramifications for EU-US relations and the EU's role in the Indo-Pacific. The lack of consultations and communication between the close partners that we are, created real difficulties. It provided a negative image of an uncoordinated or even divided West, where we should show common resolve and coordination, not least as regards geostrategic challenges.³⁴

He said that when he had met with EU Foreign Ministers they had “expressed clear solidarity with France”.

On 20 September, Mr Borrell gave [a speech on US-EU relations to the European Parliament](#), telling them the “Transatlantic partnership is vital and irreplaceable. But we need to place it on a stronger footing. AUKUS has been a wakeup call”.³⁵

[The EU have not, however, allowed its solidarity with France to significantly curtail its relations with the US and Australia.](#)

It was [reported that](#) the inaugural meeting of the EU-US Trade and Technology Council, a new forum created as part of a wider push to reset transatlantic ties after they soured during the Trump administration, might be delayed because of France's objections. The meeting, however, [went ahead as planned](#). While Clément Beaune, France's European Affairs Secretary, said on the EU-Australia trade deal it would be “unthinkable to move forward on trade negotiations as if nothing had happened with a country in which we no longer trust”,³⁶ Mr Borrell responded “Let's not mix apples and pears,” when asked if the free-trade agreement would be delayed or derailed by the AUKUS diplomatic fallout. He added “We are not taking ad hoc action motivated by individual events. ... Trade agreements with Australia will continue down their path, and we will see how things develop.”³⁷

³⁴ [“United Nations General Assembly: One week in New York”](#), High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, blog post, 25 September 2021

³⁵ [“EU-US relations: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP Plenary”](#), [European External Action Service](#), 5 October 2021.

³⁶ [“EU-Australia trade deal runs aground over submarine furor”](#), Politico, 19 September 2021.

³⁷ [“Subs snub won't sink Australia-EU trade deal, Brussels says”](#), Financial Review, 17 September 2021.

3

What does it mean for the UK?

For the UK, AUKUS reflects the UK's intention to tilt to the Indo-Pacific, as outlined in the [Integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy](#). The tilt is necessary, the Government says, because the region is "critical to our economy, our security and our global ambition to support open societies."³⁸ Prime Minister Boris Johnson told MPs the partnership demonstrates "Britain's generational commitment to the security of the Indo-Pacific" and how the UK can help Australia "preserve regional stability."³⁹ A senior White House official described UK involvement in AUKUS as a "down payment" on their effort to engage more deeply with the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁰

It ties the UK, US and Australia together in a decades long submarine programme, something the Prime Minister described as one of the "great prizes" of the deal. The UK National Security Advisor, Sir Stephen Lovegrove, described it as "perhaps the most significant capability collaboration anywhere in the world in the past six decades."⁴¹

AUKUS comes with potentially lucrative defence and security opportunities for UK industry not just in submarine build but in the other areas mentioned in the joint statement, of cyber, artificial intelligence and quantum technologies. In recent years Australia has opted for BAE Systems Type 26 design for the Royal Navy for its new Hunter-class frigate. The submarine deal may help the Royal Navy with future submarine deployments in the Indo-Pacific by potentially providing maintenance and port facilities in Australia.⁴²

However, the move has raised some concerns. Discussing the agreement in the House, MPs questioned whether the tilt to the Indo-Pacific risks focusing attention away from the security needs of the Euro-Atlantic. Keir Starmer, the Leader of the Opposition, said: "Whatever the merits of an Indo-Pacific tilt, maintaining security in Europe must remain our primary objective."⁴³ Ian Blackford, the SNP Westminster leader, raised concerns about Russia, saying: "with all the focus of this agreement on the Indo-Pacific, what risks are there that vigilant eyes are taken off the threats closer to home?"⁴⁴

³⁸ [Integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy](#), CP 403, 16 March 2021.

Library papers analysing the review and the related defence command paper are collated on the Library's website: [Integrated Review 2021](#).

³⁹ [HC Deb 16 September 2021 \[AUKUS\]](#).

⁴⁰ "[Background press call on AUKUS](#)", White House, 15 September 2021

⁴¹ "[Sir Stephen Lovegrove speech at the Council on Geostrategy](#)", Cabinet Office, 16 September 2021

⁴² "[Britain's nuclear submarines to use Australia as a base for Indo-Pacific presence](#)", The Times, 20 September 2021

⁴³ [HC Deb 16 September 2021 \[AUKUS\]](#).

⁴⁴ [HC Deb 16 September 2021 \[AUKUS\]](#).

Responding to concerns about China’s response, the Prime Minister said the partnership “is not intended to be adversarial towards any other power.”⁴⁵ Members will discuss [AUKUS’ impact on Anglo-Chinese relations](#) in a Westminster Hall debate on 20 October 2021.

⁴⁵ [HC Deb 16 September 2021 \[AUKUS\]](#).

4

What does it mean for Australia?

Scott Morrison, the Prime Minister of Australia, said the new partnership will help “protect shared values and promote security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.”⁴⁶ He cited growing security challenges in the region and the narrowing of the technological edge enjoyed by Australia and her allies, as some of the drivers of the new partnership. Euan Graham of the International Institute for Strategic Studies says the submarine switch “underlines the seismic change to Australia’s security environment” since the submarine contract was agreed with France in 2016.⁴⁷

These changes include a sharp deterioration in Australia-China relations.⁴⁸ In Australia’s 2020 Defence Strategic Update states:

Australia now faces an environment of increasing strategic competition; the introduction of more capable military systems enabled by technological change; and the increasingly aggressive use of diverse grey-zone tactics to coerce states under the threshold for a conventional military response.⁴⁹

Making the case for new nuclear-powered submarines, rather than the diesel-electric Australia had contracted France to provide, Morrison said Australia needs to have access to the most capable submarine technology available. Australia was already concerned about spiralling costs and delays to the Attack-class submarines, which may have contributed to the decision.⁵⁰

Only six other countries currently operate nuclear-powered submarines.⁵¹ Euan Graham says the agreement shows an unprecedented show of trust in Canberra by the US. He says “nuclear propulsion is prized among the crown jewels of national capability for the few who possess it”, observing that France has never transferred its own nuclear propulsion technology to anyone.⁵² Senior US officials similarly emphasised the significance of their decision to share nuclear propulsion technology, describing the move as the “biggest strategic step” that Australia has taken in generations.⁵³ Christopher

⁴⁶ [“Australia to pursue nuclear-powered submarines through new trilateral enhanced security partnership”](#), Prime Minister of Australia’s office, 16 September 2021

⁴⁷ Euan Graham, [“Australia’s well-kept nuclear submarine secret”](#), IISS, 17 September 2021

⁴⁸ See [“China Discovers the Limits of Its Power”](#), The Atlantic, 28 July 2021 and [“Aukus: Australia’s big gamble on the US over China”](#), BBC News, 22 September 2021.

⁴⁹ [2020 Defence Strategic Update](#), Australian Department of Defence, 1 July 2020

⁵⁰ [“Australia reportedly looking at an alternative to its costly new French-designed submarine”](#), The Drive, 19 January 2021; [“Australia’s Attack Class submarine project faces criticism over rising costs and milestone delays”](#), ABC News, 20 January 2021

⁵¹ The others being Russia, China, France, India, the US and UK, which are also nuclear weapon states.

⁵² Euan Graham, [“Australia’s well-kept nuclear submarine secret”](#), IISS, 17 September 2021

⁵³ [“Background press call on AUKUS”](#), White House, 15 September 2021

Pyne, a former Australian Defence Minister, said having nuclear-powered submarines will be a “step change” in Australia’s capability.”⁵⁴

The type of submarine is yet to be determined. It could be drawn from existing designs: the US Virginia class or the UK Astute class. Or from the next generation attack submarine programmes. The UK has begun a Submersible Ship Nuclear (Replacement) project to explore what follows Astute.⁵⁵ In terms of timing, AUKUS says only that it intends to bring the submarine into service “at the earliest achievable date.”⁵⁶ That is not likely to be until at least the late 2030s, and Australia will extend the life of its current Collins-class, although former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull is sceptical of the timings and worries Australia may be left with a submarine capability gap.⁵⁷

3 Nuclear versus diesel-electric submarines

Nuclear propulsion offers “unambiguous advantages” over diesel-powered submarines, but this should not be “overhyped”, says Euan Graham.⁵⁸ Nuclear-powered submarines can remain submerged at length, unlike diesel-electric submarines which need to resurface, and therefore remain undetected for longer (in theory). However, they are not necessarily quieter and require more expensive infrastructure and maintenance.

⁵⁴ Defence Committee, [Oral evidence: The Navy: purpose and procurement](#), HC 168 2021-22, 21 September 2021 q109

⁵⁵ [PQ 33156 \[Submarines\], 21 July 2021](#). “Design work begins on successor to Astute-class submarines in £170 million deal”, Royal Navy, 17 September 2021. Naval news explores the options in: “[The 5 main options for Australia’s AUKUS nuclear submarine deal](#)”, Naval News, 29 September 2021

⁵⁶ “[UK, US and Australia launch new security partnership](#)”, Gov.uk, 15 September 2021

⁵⁷ “[Australia details its nuclear-submarine ambitions](#)”, Defense News, 16 September 2021; “[Trust is at the heart of Australia’s influence](#)”, War on the Rocks, 4 October 2021 (reprinted with permission from a speech given at the National Press Club of Australia on 29 September 2021).

⁵⁸ Euan Graham, “[Australia’s well-kept nuclear submarine secret](#)”, IISS, 17 September 2021

5

What does it mean for the US?

A senior Biden Administration official said 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.⁵⁹

Asked about the message they were trying to send to China, the official stressed AUKUS was “not aimed at one country, but about advancing strategic interests, upholding international rules-based order, and promoting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific”. China was not mentioned in the [Joint Statement](#) released by the leaders of the US, UK and Australia.

While the administration may have been keen to downplay the role China played in the US's calculus for the deal, commentators are united in believing that it was created to counter growing perceptions of a rising Chinese threat.

A few days after the agreement was announced Scott Morrison flew to Washington and met with senior Congressional leaders. The deal appears to have bi-partisan support in Congress, which is important as Congressional approval will be required to allow the US Government to share its nuclear-propulsion technology with Australia. The details of how the technology will be shared, to be worked on over the next 18 months, and in particular the guarantees Australia can provide on keeping the technology secure will be [of particular interest to Congress](#), and mean that AUKUS is not yet a done deal.

If approved, Australia will become only the second country, after the UK, that the US has agreed to share such sensitive technology with. The move underlines the [depth of cooperation](#) it is potentially opening up with Australia, but also the significance of the Indo-Pacific region to the US' foreign policy and defence strategies.

Pivot to Asia becomes a reality

While President Obama's [strategy of a “pivot to Asia”](#), announced in 2011, did bring a greater focus to US diplomatic efforts in the region, it was often criticised as having few concrete achievements (though one of its tangible outcomes was a [deployment of US Marines to Darwin Australia on a rotational basis](#)).

President Trump focused US foreign policy on countering the threat from China. His administration's [2018 National Defense Strategy](#) was clear that

⁵⁹ [“Background Press Call on AUKUS”](#), The White House, 15 September 2021.

China was a “strategic competitor”, that is “leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighbouring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage”. While the strategy advocated deepening partnerships in the region, critics say his administration did little in this regard.

President Biden’s administration has largely aligned with the previous administration’s assessment of China, although there has been a greater emphasis on re-building relationships with the US’ allies.

[Interim National Security Strategic Guidance](#) published by the White House in March 2021, stated that it would allow the US “to prevail in strategic competition with China or any other nation”. It stated further:

Our democratic alliances enable us to present a common front, produce a unified vision, and pool our strength to promote high standards, establish effective international rules, and hold countries like China to account. That is why we will reaffirm, invest in, and modernize the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and our alliances with Australia, Japan, and the Republic of Korea – which, along with our other global alliances and partnerships, are America’s greatest strategic asset.

What now for US-Europe relations?

Delays in the [Senate’s confirmation of the administration’s nominees for European ambassadors](#) and officials in the State Department’s Europe team, contributed to what many saw as an underestimation of the reaction of France, and made the process of smoothing relations in the aftermath more complicated.

In the longer term, while the Biden administration may have stated it wants to reaffirm its commitment to NATO, some have questioned whether transatlantic relations will now play second-string to the Indo-Pacific.

Maya Kandel, head of the US programme at the Institut Montaigne, argues that the AUKUS agreement clarifies that “the transatlantic relationship is not central to US foreign policy anymore: it is no longer the “cornerstone” of US engagement in the world” and that “NATO has moved to the backseat”.⁶⁰ She adds:

There certainly are continuities in foreign policy from Obama to Trump and from Trump to Biden, but focusing on these hides the most important aspect: over the past years, the United States has exited the post-Cold War era and has embraced a post-Atlantic strategy; Europeans are still working on the adjustment.⁶¹

⁶⁰ [“The Submarine Deal: What it Says About the US, What it Means for Europe”](#), Institut Montaigne, 21 September 2021.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Ian Lesser of the German Marshall Fund questioned why the American moves in the Indo-Pacific have to be interpreted as a zero-sum equation in which Europe's importance is diminished, saying "I don't see any diminution of American interest and commitment to European security in the wake of Afghanistan or the moves in Asia."⁶²

Regardless of the relative importance Europe holds in US foreign policy, it seems clear that trust between them has been damaged by the announcement of the AUKUS deal and that has implications for American policy in the region. Rosa Balfour of Carnegie Europe argues "The diminished trust undercuts the possibility of the United States and the EU working together on China".⁶³ However, the two sides have shared interests in the region, and the priorities outlined in the EU's own [Indo-Pacific strategy](#) suggest that in the longer term there may be more opportunities than barriers to cooperation.

⁶² ["The Sharp U.S. Pivot to Asia Is Throwing Europe Off Balance"](#), New York Times, 28 September 2021.

⁶³ ["What the U.S.-British-Australian Security Pact Means for Europe"](#), Carnegie Europe, 21 September 2021.

6 What does it mean for non-proliferation?

The AUKUS submarine deal is concerned solely with naval nuclear propulsion. It does not involve the transfer of nuclear weapons to Australia. As such, AUKUS does not contravene the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).⁶⁴ Nor does it contravene the or the [South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty](#).⁶⁵ New Zealand, which is a signatory to that treaty and has a long-standing anti-nuclear stance, has already stated that Australia's new nuclear submarines would not be permitted in its territorial waters.⁶⁶

While the AUKUS deal does not contravene any treaty obligations, there are concerns that the deal sets a bad precedent for nuclear non-proliferation efforts more broadly, although opinions among experts differ.

The greatest concern is that the deal creates a precedent that the US, in particular, will struggle to prevent from “proliferating out of control around the world.”⁶⁷ James Acton of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace considers the deal as setting a “troubling precedent for nuclear nonproliferation policy” as it will allow Australia to become the first non-nuclear weapon state to remove nuclear material from IAEA safeguards and inspections.⁶⁸ He 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—with

⁶⁴ The NPT prohibits non-nuclear weapon states from acquiring nuclear weapons and weapons related technology and the nuclear weapon states from providing any assistance to this end. Under the terms of the treaty non-nuclear weapon states are able to access peaceful nuclear technology. the [IAEA's Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement](#) permits non-nuclear-weapon states to withdraw nuclear material from safeguards for use in a “non-proscribed military activity,” that is, naval reactors.

⁶⁵ The treaty prohibits the acquisition, possession, stationing and testing of nuclear weapons in the treaty zone but does not extend to nuclear propulsion.

⁶⁶ [“AUKUS submarines banned from New Zealand as pact exposes divide with Western allies”](#), The Guardian, 16 September 2021

⁶⁷ Sébastien Philippe, [“The new Australia, UK and US nuclear submarine announcement: a terrible decision for the nonproliferation regime”](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 17 September 2021

⁶⁸ The [IAEA's Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement](#) permits non-nuclear-weapon states to withdraw nuclear material from safeguards for use in a “non-proscribed military activity,” that is, naval reactors.

the reasonable expectation that, because of the Australia precedent, they would not face intolerable costs for doing so.⁶⁹

In an article for the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Sébastien Philippe highlights the potential for other US allies, such as South Korea, to ask Washington for a similar arrangement, or the potential for cooperation on naval reactors between other nations such as Russia and China, in order to offset AUKUS. He also raises the prospect of would-be nuclear states, such as Iran, exploiting the precedent this creates to potentially divert nuclear material into a nuclear weapons programme. He observes:

Until now, it was the US commitment to nonproliferation that relentlessly crushed or greatly limited these aspirations toward nuclear-powered submarine technology.⁷⁰

Several analysts have compared the AUKUS deal to the US/India civil nuclear cooperation deal in 2008⁷¹ which, at the time, George Perkovich labelled as the “selective non-enforcement” of international non-proliferation rules.⁷²

Yet, Ian Stewart, Executive Director of the James Martin Center argues that there is a “strong argument” to be made that a country like Australia, which has an IAEA Safeguards Additional Protocol in place, can “credibly possess nuclear submarines without undermining the nonproliferation norm”. He goes on to suggest that “if done right, the cooperation can potentially lead to a valuable model on how to apply safeguards to submarines”.⁷³

Another element of the AUKUS deal which has also raised concern, is [Australia’s acquisition of Tomahawk land-attack cruise missiles from the US](#). While not in direct contravention of the [Missile Technology Control Regime \(MTCR\)](#),⁷⁴ the restraint on transfers of missile technologies that is inherent in the regime could potentially be undermined and set a dangerous precedent to other countries.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ James Acton, [“Why the AUKUS submarine deal is bad for nonproliferation – and what to do about it”](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 September 2021

⁷⁰ *ibid*

⁷¹ This is examined in greater detail in [Nuclear weapons at a glance: India and Pakistan](#), House of Commons Library, December 2020

⁷² George Perkovich, “Global implications of the US-India deal”, *Daedalus*, Winter 2010

⁷³ Ian Stewart, [“The Australian submarine agreement: turning nuclear cooperation upside down”](#), Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 17 September 2021

⁷⁴ The MTCR is an informal political understanding between Participating States that seeks to limit the proliferation of missile technologies. It is not a treaty and is not legally binding. The foundations of the MTCR are examined in [Nuclear weapons: disarmament and non-proliferation regimes](#), House of Commons Library, June 2016

⁷⁵ See [“The Missile Technology Control Regime at a crossroads”](#), SIPRI Topical Backgrounder, 1 October 2021

7

Context: the maritime significance of the Indo-Pacific/South China Sea

The South China Sea is home to over 30,000 small islands and reefs, distributed across three archipelagos. The vast majority are not permanently occupied. Disputes over their sovereignty involve numerous countries across the region. Access to fisheries and oil and gas resources are one of the contributing factors to these disputes.

The area is also one of the world's major shipping routes. It is estimated that every year the South China Sea carries a one-third of global shipping,⁷⁶ and in 2016 more than 30 per cent of the global maritime crude oil trade, passed through those waters.⁷⁷ The Malacca Strait between Singapore and Indonesia is a particularly vulnerable 'chokepoint' for sea-borne trade.⁷⁸

Over the last decade, there have been rising tensions over rival territorial claims in the East and South China Seas. China has been accused of taking unilateral actions, including the building of new islands, to strengthen its control over the area. Other nations such as the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia have also fortified or built upon existing islands and reefs in disputed waters.⁷⁹

In 2016, an Arbitral Tribunal under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea [ruled against actions taken by China](#) in a case brought by the Philippines. The prohibited actions included preventing Filipino fishermen from fishing in waters they had traditionally worked in, not preventing Chinese vessels from fishing in the Philippines Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and China's construction of artificial islands and structures at Mischief Reef, part of the Philippines EEZ and continental shelf.⁸⁰ China [has ignored the ruling](#).

⁷⁶ "[How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?](#)" China Power. August 2, 2017. Updated January 25, 2021. Accessed October 5, 2021.

⁷⁷ US Energy Information Administration, '[More than 30% of global maritime crude oil trade moves through the South China Sea](#)', 27 August 2018.

⁷⁸ Commons Library CBP 7481, '[The South China Sea dispute: July 2016 update](#)', July 2016. PP 5.

⁷⁹ The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative [maps the more than 90 outposts](#) five claimants occupy (China, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam) on nearly 70 disputed reefs and islets spread across the South China Sea. Accessed 4 October 2021.

⁸⁰ The ruling also made judgements on whether certain maritime features in the South China Sea were "islands", "rocks", "low-tide elevations" (LTEs) or "submerged banks". This is important because, unlike fully entitled islands, rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own do not generate an EEZ and a continental shelf. Consequently, rocks do not give rights to resource exploitation beyond their territorial sea. Furthermore, LTEs or submerged banks do not generate any maritime zone. For more details see "[Legal Victory for the Philippines against China: A Case Study](#)", Global Challenges, Issue 1, Graduate Institute Geneva, February 2017,

The 2016 ruling did not take a position on who should have sovereignty in the area. The UK has [called on China to accept the ruling](#) while adhering to its longstanding stance of not taking a position on the sovereignty issue.

The UK has been more vocal in the last few years about the freedom of maritime navigation under international law in the South China Sea than sovereignty. In this regard it shares the views of other Western powers, including the US, which has been sending naval ships into the area to uphold this right. China claims that it supports the principle, provided its territorial waters are not violated.

The UK has also increased its naval exercises in the area. HMS Albion conducted a US style freedom of navigation operation by the Paracel islands in August 2018, and in early 2019 the Royal Navy [conducted two joint military exercises with the US Navy](#) in the South China Sea.

At the end of September 2021, the UK sent a warship through the Taiwan strait for the first time since 2008 (HMS Enterprise, a survey vessel, navigated the strait in 2019). HMS Richmond, a frigate deployed with the Royal Navy's aircraft carrier strike group, sailed through the strait on a trip from Japan to Vietnam.

The Chinese military followed the vessel and were reported to have warned it away. The People's Liberation Army also condemned the move saying it was behaviour that "harboured evil intentions".⁸¹

For more background information see:

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- Commons Library CBP 7481, '[The South China Sea dispute: July 2016 update](#)', July 2016.
- [The Minister for Asia's closing remarks](#), 'South China Sea: Freedom of Navigation', Commons Chamber Debate, Volume 679: 3 September 2020.
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⁸¹ "[China condemns Britain for Taiwan Strait warship mission](#)", Reuters, 27 September 2021.

8 Further reading

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- ["AUKUS: Lessons for Japan's Defense Industry"](#), The Diplomat [online], 28 September 2021
- ["Opinion: Should Russia Be Worried by the New AUKUS Alliance?"](#), Moscow Times [online], 30 September 2021
- ["The false promise of AUKUS"](#), European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 29 September 2021
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- ["With the AUKUS alliance confronting China, New Zealand should ramp up its anti-nuclear diplomacy"](#), The Conversation, 27 September 2021
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- ["The AUKUS Nuclear Submarine Deal: Unanswered Questions for Australia"](#), The Diplomat [online], 22 September 2021 (accessed 30 September 2021)
- ["Analysis: Australia must take Southeast Asian reactions to AUKUS seriously"](#), United States Study Centre, 22 September 2021

- ["After AUKUS: The uncertain future of American and European cooperation in the Indo-Pacific"](#), European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 22 September 2021
- ["Commentary: AUKUS lessons of policy objectives and secrecy"](#), UK in a Changing Europe, 22 September 2021
- ["Could the AUKUS Deal Strengthen Deterrence Against China—And Yet Come at a Real Cost to Australia?"](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 20 September 2021
- ["Why the AUKUS submarine deal is bad for nonproliferation – and what to do about it"](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 September 2021
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- ["What AUKUS and Afghanistan Tell Us About the US Asia Strategy"](#), The Diplomat [online], 21 September 2021
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- ["AUKUS reveals much about the new global strategic context"](#), Chatham House, 18 September 2021
- ["AUKUS and Submarines: The Fallout for France"](#), The Diplomat [online], 18 September 2021 (accessed 30 September 2021)
- ["Controversial US, UK, Australia deal has ramifications for Middle East"](#), The Jerusalem Post [online], 18 September 2021 (accessed 30 September 2021)
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- ["AUKUS is a victory for freedom, democracy and the rule of law", Cap X](#), 17 September 2021
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