

AUKUS Submarines

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Steve McCabe >

(Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab)

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2. Whether he is taking steps to ensure that AUKUS submarines are built in the UK. (Unique identification number 903329 (Unique identification number))

The Secretary of State for Defence >

(Mr Ben Wallace)

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I am meeting my Australian counterpart this week to discuss a range of defence issues. The UK is one of the few countries in the world that can design and build nuclear-powered submarines. Developing that capability represents a major undertaking for Australia, and experience suggests that collaboration is often necessary to develop complex platforms. I am optimistic that UK industry will benefit from such collaboration.

Steve McCabe >

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I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer. He will be aware that when the former Prime Minister made his statement on the AUKUS deal back on 15 September 2021, he was emphatic that the deal would lead to hundreds of highly skilled jobs in Scotland, the north of England and the midlands. When does the Secretary of State think that those jobs will be created, and can he give me any idea about the specific locations?

Mr Wallace >

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We also said at the time that there would be an 18-month study programme where we work out both design and work share for this submarine. That is drawing to a close. We are waiting for the Australian Government to make their decision on what AUKUS looks like. Given the amounts of money that Australia will be spending on this enterprise, the need for international collaboration and the fact that both Barrow-in-Furness and Faslane are global centres of excellence that will help to deliver on that deal, I am confident that all those statements will turn out to be exactly as they were made. Let me give the hon. Gentleman some indication of this: we are already increasing the number of jobs in Barrow, from 10,000 people to 17,000, in order to fulfil both the Dreadnought programme—the nuclear deterrent—and the next generation of Britain's attack submarines.

Simon Fell >

(Barrow and Furness) (Con)

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I thank my right hon. Friend for the considerable effort that his Department, the Government and the Navy have put into securing this important agreement. It was heartening to see the presence of representatives from the Royal Australian Navy and also the Australian Government at the commissioning of HMS Anson, and to hear the announcement that Australian submariners will be training on that vessel, too. With that in mind, does my right hon. Friend agree that this agreement is crucial to securing a new geo-political and strategic agreement with Australia, the UK and the UK on areas such as subsea and cyber to keep us safe?

Mr Wallace >

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Barrow-in-Furness, Devonport and Faslane are key components in delivering our nuclear submarine capability and can almost not be replicated around the world. It is very important that we recognise our speciality and skills. When Australia chose to go for nuclear submarines as an option, it did so because it recognised that there were about five countries on earth that could do this, and that it was important if it wanted to retain a strategic edge in the Pacific and its part of the world against any future adversaries. We know that: that is what we did for the past 70 years in the Atlantic alongside our American friends. I am delighted that Australia is joining that programme.

Martin Docherty-Hughes >

(West Dunbartonshire) (SNP)

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The AUKUS deal was supposed to be the defining agreement of the Indo-Pacific tilt, which this Government said in the Integrated Review—I am sure that the Secretary of State remembers this—would make the UK the European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific. Given today's news and the fact that the combination of historic defence cuts and inflation will make the high hopes of the Integrated Review harder to fulfil this time, will the Secretary of State inform the House whether it will still be the UK's aim to be the European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific?

Mr Wallace >

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The hon. Gentleman is right to ask those questions. It is still our ambition. So far, two of the planks of AUKUS are already in place, and we will be seeing the full details of that. It is no mean undertaking to commit to helping another country build that capability and be engaged in its training and deployment. That is a very deep and enduring deal. The investment of the United States in joining with us all those decades ago has lasted 70 years—that is a tilt on any basis—but we also had a carrier strike group on a visit only two years ago. That has continued, and we plan for another one in 2025.

Andrew Bridgen >

(North West Leicestershire) (Ind)

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More broadly, what steps is my right hon. Friend's Department taking to further strengthen and broaden the AUKUS alliance?

Mr Wallace >

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The second pillar of AUKUS includes things such as artificial intelligence, hypersonics, cyber and all sorts of other technologies that are critical not only to complement the deployment of submarines, but to further engage our collective security. Those are technologies that are rarely shared between nations, but the United States recognises that, in order to face up to the challenges till the end of this decade, we need to make sure that we both share our industries and that we have protection from each other's markets to make sure that we not only share, but get to sell into them as well, which is quite important.

Mr Speaker >

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I call the shadow Secretary of State.

John Healey >

(Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab)

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This week, like the Secretary of State, I will be meeting the Australian Defence Minister and discussing AUKUS with him. I want him to know that, while there may be a change of UK Government at the next election, there will be no change in Britain's commitment to AUKUS. If done well, this pact could deepen our closest alliances, strengthen security in the Indo-Pacific and bring game-changing investment to Britain. What priority has the Defence Secretary given to building the first subs here, and when will the build plan be announced?

Mr Wallace >

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I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's support for AUKUS and I note his point on a Government, though of course there will be no complacency from the Labour party; I hope they will not repeat what happened once in the 1990s. The reality is that AUKUS makes good security sense, and those on this Labour Front Bench recognise good global security, even if those on the last one did not. His questions are a matter for the Australians, who ultimately will make the decisions and are the customer in the sense of where they spend the Australian taxpayer's money. We have of course contributed to the discussion and offer, but Australia will have to make a decision about time and how quickly it wants the capability, how much it wants to build in Australia and what is the right fit for its ambition: Britain or the United States' existing fleet. I suspect that will come some time in March, if not in February, and I am happy to keep him up to date. We have put in a good proposition, and I am delighted he is meeting his counterpart, because our relationships matter.

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