

Nuclear Submarines: AUKUS

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Question

 2.46pm

Asked by

Lord Walney >

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To ask His Majesty's Government what steps they will take to ensure the United Kingdom meets the increased demands to produce nuclear submarines entailed by the AUKUS agreement with the United States of America and Australia.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Defence >

(Baroness Goldie) (Con)

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My Lords, the UK is stepping up to meet the opportunities of the AUKUS nuclear submarine agreement, a multidecade undertaking that will create thousands of jobs. We are investing an extra £3 billion over the next two years in our defence nuclear enterprise, including support for AUKUS. Rolls-Royce plans to almost double the size of its Derby site, creating 1,170 skilled roles and demonstrating our commitment to the expertise embodied in British industry.

Lord Walney >

(CB)

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I thank the Minister for that Answer. I should add that my declared interest for the Purpose Coalition includes advising Rolls-Royce on how to meet that production challenge. AUKUS is great news for our global security and for the UK submarine industry, but does the Minister accept that it requires a step-change in Whitehall departments working together on a genuine national endeavour, which has long been promised but has not been delivered across Whitehall?

Baroness Goldie >

(Con)

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I thank the noble Lord for the role he is playing and wish him well in his advisory capacity to Rolls-Royce. This is a very important project. It is probably one of the most important we have entered into in the post-Second World War period. He is absolutely correct that there is a need for cross-government co-operation and consultation. That is happening. As he is also aware, one of the big challenges is in relation to skills. We are very cognisant of that, and activity is under way to try to increase nuclear sector engagement with young people and attract talent from a more diverse background.

Lord Singh of Wimbledon >

(CB)

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My Lords, does the Minister accept that increasing the number of submarines armed with nuclear weapons invites less responsible countries, like Russia and China, to do the same? This increases the possibility of their accidental or malevolent use, leading to horrendous suffering.

Baroness Goldie >

(Con)

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I can simply clarify to the Chamber that the AUKUS programme's SSN-AUKUS submarines are nuclear-propelled, not nuclear-armed.

Lord Browne of Ladyton >

(Lab)

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My Lords, the first AUKUS pillar 2 autonomous weapons and artificial intelligence trial took place in April. On 27 June, the White House Indo-Pacific co-ordinator, Kurt Campbell, said that there would be co-operation with all three countries on artificial intelligence and quantum computing, and that other allies and partners would be invited to join this development. That is quite a significant development, although not unexpected, given the elements of AUKUS. Is there any possibility that we will get a ministerial Statement on this matter?

Baroness Goldie >

(Con)

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What I can confirm to the noble Lord is what is already in the public domain. We have always said that, as progress is made with the three countries on pillar 2—which is distinct from the original pillar, which is trilateral—other critical defence capabilities will then seek opportunities to engage allies and close partners. As the noble Lord correctly indicated, the trial held in April was most encouraging, and a two-minute video was released by all three nations. We have to take one step at a time.

Baroness Smith of Newnham >

(LD)

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My Lords, while AUKUS is clearly very important, Europe and our neighbourhood remain the closest security partners and allies for the United Kingdom. Could the Minister confirm that working with AUKUS will not reduce our commitment to our neighbourhood? At the same time, if there will be increased skills and work for developing the nuclear-propelled submarines, could some of that expertise be used to ensure that the development of other equipment, under the MoD's auspices, is fit for purpose the first time round?

Baroness Goldie >

(Con)

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On the first point, it has always been acknowledged that, although AUKUS is intended to do two things—to augment our Indo-Pacific tilt and to provide us with our new class of AUKUS submarines and succession to Astute—it will also enable the UK and its partners to develop capabilities that will, for example, not only reinforce NATO but help the states in the Indo-Pacific bolster their own security. On the noble Baroness's latter point, we already have a huge base of skills in the UK, as I indicated to the noble Lord, Lord Walney. That, quite simply, is why AUKUS is a trilateral agreement with the United States, the UK and Australia. We are building on that; we are not complacent. We need to expand that skills base. I agree with the noble Baroness that, once we do that, we will see a fanning out of other benefits to the broader defence enterprise.

Lord Carlile of Berriew >

(CB)

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My Lords, for the aspirations set out in my noble friend Lord Walney's Question to be achieved, we need to ensure that the United Kingdom provides the capital impetus for us to participate fully in the construction and development of the submarines. Will the Minister tell us what steps are being taken by His Majesty's Government to ensure that the United Kingdom is a full participant in the construction programme?

Baroness Goldie >

(Con)

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I respond to the noble Lord by reminding the Chamber that, in March this year, the Prime Minister announced that we are investing an extra £3 billion over the next two years in our defence nuclear enterprise to support AUKUS and other areas. Other financial contributions will be coming from Australia; for example, at the Rolls-Royce base in Derby plans are under way for a significant expansion of its Raynesway nuclear reactor manufacturing site. That will create 1,170 skilled jobs. We expect this tandem of co-operation to produce not only a contribution to the project itself but a financial contribution to the endeavour.

Lord West of Spithead >

(Lab)

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My Lords, the AUKUS programme is extremely good news; it is very good news for the UK and for stability. Looking to the future, does the Minister agree that this will allow us, in the longer term, to increase the number of SSNs we have—because we have too few—and that that will be good for the north Atlantic and the Arctic as well as the Far East? They can move from one place to the other in a matter of three or four weeks, so does she agree that this is a potential for the future?

Baroness Goldie >

(Con)

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It give me great pleasure to agree with the noble Lord—it is refreshing and, I hope, a recurring experience. The noble Lord makes a very good point. As he is aware, we currently have Vanguard that will translate into Dreadnought in due course. On the Astute class, the final two submarines are still being built: boat six, "Agamemnon", and boat seven, "Agincourt". They will make an important contribution, but as we move on to the Astute class, the noble Lord is correct. We are aware of diverging maritime challenges, not least in the high north and the Arctic. The MoD is cognisant of that. I referred to the fact that we have published our Arctic strategy to his colleague, the noble Lord, Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, on Friday.

Lord Coaker >

(Lab)

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My Lords, His Majesty's Opposition Front Bench fully supports the AUKUS programme. As the noble Lord, Lord West, has pointed out, it will make a huge contribution to global security in the decades to come. Returning to the point a number of noble Lords have mentioned, there are already thousands of unfilled vacancies in skilled engineering in our defence industries. There will need to be a step change with respect to skills if we are to fully utilise all the opportunities that are available under the AUKUS scheme. The Minister mentioned some of the initiatives the Government are bringing forward, but I ask her—as a matter of urgency—to look at whether that needs refreshing. So far, all our efforts in that have not delivered the results we want.

Baroness Goldie >

(Con)

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I can share with the noble Lord that additional apprenticeship and graduate bursary schemes have been implemented across the enterprise, and significant further increases are planned to build the capabilities to increase the cohort of apprentices and new graduate opportunities by 2029-30. Importantly—and it refers to the point the noble Lord, Lord Walney, was making—the MoD, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and employers in the nuclear circuit are all working together as part of the Nuclear Skills Strategy Group to address common challenges. The noble Lord is correct to allude to the challenge: it is there but we are not complacent about it, and we have a number of initiatives designed to try to address it.

Lord Peach >

(CB)

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My Lords, does the Minister agree that moving from the step change we have all agreed this afternoon will require an integrated approach? That will then leave the question of command and control. Who will lead on AUKUS for the whole of the Government to make sure that, end to end, we deliver this important programme?

Baroness Goldie >

(Con)

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I hope I can reassure the noble and gallant Lord that the Cabinet Secretary has asked the MoD's Permanent Secretary, David Williams, to be the UK's AUKUS principal. That is a very significant position. He will have overall responsibility for the programme in the UK with support from the Director General Nuclear, the Deputy Chief of Defence staff, military capability and senior civil servants from a number of relevant departments from across Whitehall. He will be at the very top of the chain, the essential co-ordinating presence.

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