

AUKUS Security Partnership

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Question

🕒 3.39pm

Asked by

Lord Walney >

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To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs what progress His Majesty's Government has made in implementing the AUKUS security partnership between the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States of America.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs >

(Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton) (Con)

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My Lords, AUKUS is an unprecedented partnership that is central to delivering security and prosperity for the UK and our partners in the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic. We are making significant progress to deliver nuclear-powered submarines for the UK and Australia and are deepening co-operation on cutting-edge military technologies. We are breaking down barriers to defence trade and delivering benefits at home, securing £4 billion of contracts for British companies and generating thousands of jobs including in Derby and, I am pleased to say, Barrow-in-Furness.

Lord Walney >

(CB)

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I thank the noble Lord for that Answer. As he rightly says, this is a landmark security partnership that requires a sustained commitment from multiple Governments over years, indeed decades. What is the Foreign Secretary doing to ensure that the focus of his department and of the whole Government can remain on this despite the ongoing crises in other areas? In particular, how can he prioritise the diplomatic work needed to ensure that the US can make progress on ITAR reform that can enable the technological and industrial co-operation necessary to deter our common adversary?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton >

(Con)

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On how the Government co-ordinate this at a time where there are many distractions, I can say that the National Security Council is playing a role at bringing together all the ways that we can support Team Barrow to make sure that there is support for education, skills, housing, transport and all that will be needed to scale up this production effort as we go from 11,000 people employed building submarines to 17,000. On ITAR, which has been a troubling issue that British Governments have had to deal with for decades

with American Governments, it is essential that AUKUS partners can trade freely between each other in defence equipment. I am pleased to say that we have made some real progress: I met Secretary Blinken in early December and on 22 December President Biden signed the US National Defense Authorization Act, which enables licence-free trade between the AUKUS countries, and we are working with the State Department on the technical details to make sure that really happens.

Lord Howell of Guildford >

(Con)

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My Lords, are any other countries applying to join the AUKUS partnership? Are we thinking of applying to join the Quad—that is Australia, Japan, India and the United States? Will the UK attend the Perth conference on Indian Ocean security and defence, where all these issues tend to come together and will be discussed this summer?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton >

(Con)

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On the last point, I think I am right in saying that one of my ministerial colleagues will attend the Perth conference because it is very important. As my noble friend will know, AUKUS has two pillars. Pillar 1 is about the nuclear-powered submarines of Britain, Australia and America, and I do not think there will be additional partners in that. However, pillar 2 looks at advanced military technology for the future, and there we are open to the idea of other countries—possibly Canada, as people have mentioned, or Japan—which might want to join it because it is about defence equipment for the future. The point he makes about the Quad is very important. We would say that this is complementary to that activity.

Baroness Smith of Newnham >

(LD)

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My Lords, when AUKUS was first announced, the suggestion, at least from the MoD, seemed to be that somehow the United Kingdom had just slipped into an agreement with Australia over the nuclear submarines but clearly, as the Secretary of State has pointed out, there is also the wider aspect of AUKUS. Do His Majesty's Government have a strategic approach to this? Are we simply waiting to see whether other countries such as Canada wish to join or are we actually planning what we want to do? Similarly, we have a trilateral agreement with Japan and Italy over fighter jets. Are we just being ad hoc or is there a real strategy here for our security?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton >

(Con)

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This is a deeply strategic approach. First, it fits into a tilt to the Indo-Pacific. Noble Lords can see we have signed the Hiroshima accord with Japan; we have a new status at ASEAN; we have very strong partnerships with India; and now we have AUKUS, which is a defence stature that puts us in with Australia and America in a very strategic way. In terms of the partners for pillar 2, we would welcome others to come but on each occasion we will have to ask, "What will they bring, is it the right thing, is it the right country and is it the right fit?" The strategic move of AUKUS is incredibly powerful.

Lord Ricketts >

(CB)

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My Lords, speaking as another member of the club of those on Mr Putin's blacklist, I welcome the AUKUS agreement but ask whether the Minister will accept that the handling of the French was pretty catastrophic? Does he accept that France is a major Indo-Pacific power and that now, when those bruises have perhaps healed somewhat, there is time to work with the French as well in the Indo-Pacific area, where they have a great deal to contribute?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton >

(Con)

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The noble Lord makes a good point, which is that, ultimately, Britain and France should co-operate as closely as we can, because we are similar-sized powers with similar-sized militaries and global ambitions. That is what the Lancaster House agreement that he did so much to bring about was all about. What I would say to French partners now looking at this is that what AUKUS does for UK capacity is make sure that we replace the Astute submarines, which are incredibly high-tech and successful, with a new-generation AUKUS submarine—so the funding and the capacity are in place for that. We are assuring our future, and that is good for France because we can then talk with it about how it will secure the future of its submarine programme.

Lord Dobbs >

(Con)

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My Lords, nobody has yet mentioned China, so allow me to do so. Will my noble friend agree that it is important that we continue to talk with China and find as many areas, and expand on as many areas, of agreement as possible? But, in all this discussion, is it not possible to focus too narrowly on the threat of China? Should we not do more to embrace the democracies in Asia, such as Japan, India, Malaysia and South Korea? They are already more populous than China, are growing economically much faster than China and, in a few years' time, will be far more economically powerful than China.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton >

(Con)

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I very much agree with my noble friend. You can do both those things. It is important that we have a relationship with China. We have many disagreements, and it is an “epoch-defining challenge”, as the integrated review puts it, but, where we can find areas to progress discussions, we should. However, my noble friend is completely right to focus on the emerging democracies of the Far East, which is why I note not just AUKUS but the Hiroshima accord, the ASEAN relationship and the ministerial connections we have in Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam. I think I was the first ever serving Prime Minister to visit Vietnam, and I hope to go back soon.

Lord West of Spithead >

(Lab)

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My Lords, this security agreement is incredibly exciting. Without it, we would not be able to develop and get a sufficient number of nuclear submarines to replace the Astute class. For that reason, it is very important. Although the timescale looks long, we should pull teams together now in terms of how we will design and build that submarine because, if we do not, we will not do so in time. Also, because the Australians will have the Virginia class, the Americans will probably start doing a design instead.

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton >

(Con)

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The noble Lord is completely right that we have to get on with it, which is why there is Team Barrow to bring together the town council, BAE Systems and the Government. A lot of money is being put in—£25 billion from the Government and a further £16 million of levelling-up money—to make sure we have not just the defence capacity but the physical capacity in the town and the people to do this. I am confident we can get this done. The Virginia-class submarines are being sold by the Americans to the Australians to help prevent them from having a gap. It is up to us to make sure we do not have a gap and that there is no break between our excellent Astute-class submarines—I am proud that most of them were built during my time in office as Prime Minister—and the AUKUS submarines that will follow.

Lord Alton of Liverpool >

(CB)

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My Lords, it was said by the Foreign Affairs Committee of another place that South Korea and Japan should be

“invited to join an AUKUS technological defence cooperation agreement”—

or pillar 2, which the noble Lord referred to in his initial reply. This was not just waiting on events; it urged us to invite them to join AUKUS, and I wondered whether he would give that recommendation further consideration. I will pursue the point made by his noble friend a moment ago. Bloomberg estimated that, if there were a blockade of the Taiwan Strait, it would cost the world economy some \$10 trillion. Above and beyond AUKUS, what are we doing to deter the Communist Party of China?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton >

(Con)

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One of the things we are doing more generally is stressing the importance of freedom of navigation. That lies behind the action we are taking in the Red Sea and I hope to hold discussions with Chinese counterparts in days to come where we will ask them, given the importance of trade to China, to be as fully supportive of freedom of navigation as we are, because that matters wherever you are in the world, including the Taiwan Strait.

Lord Houghton of Richmond >

(CB)

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Superficially, this sounds like very good news and I welcome it, but were there no voices at the National Security Council that spoke to caution at all in respect of risk and affordability? In terms of affordability, Team Barrow sounds quite expensive. Is this again going to be at the expense of the conventional programme of UK defence? In terms of risk, is there not a risk of leakage of our very small supply of very highly qualified people, who would rather follow their career paths in Fremantle than in Barrow?

Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton >

(Con)

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I do not believe that the noble and gallant Lord’s concerns are right. The money going into Barrow is a drop in the ocean compared to the cost of one submarine: as he well knows, these things come out at about £1 billion each. We need to make sure that Barrow, which has incredible manufacturing expertise, is fit to do this extra work that is going to be required as it scales up to 17,000 jobs. Are we going to benefit as a country? I would say absolutely yes. Rolls-Royce in Derby is going to be providing the nuclear reactors for these submarines—not just for the ones we use but also the ones Australia uses. This is good for our defence, good for our international relations and good for our industrial base.

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