

UK under AUKUS pressure



UK DEFENCE SECRETARY John Healey has recently stated his government's commitment to a 'NATO first' defence strategy, prioritising European security over military involvement in the Indo-Pacific region. He affirmed the "... government's commitment to NATO is unshakeable. We will have a 'NATO first' defence strategy. European security will be our foreign and defence priority."

Balancing the UK's commitments between NATO and AUKUS presents significant strategic and financial pressures for the country. NATO obligations require substantial military resources to counter threats, primarily from Russia, demanding extensive land, sea and air capabilities across Europe. Conversely, the AUKUS partnership emphasises advanced naval and technological capabilities to respond to China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific, particularly through the development of nuclear-powered submarines and the

ABOVE: Might the British Army be forced to withdraw from the US-led PrSM program? Image: UK MoD



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integration of cutting-edge technologies. Critics warn that pursuing both alliances simultaneously could overstretch Britain's already constrained defence budget, leading to capability gaps, reduced operational effectiveness and diluted influence.

The entire UK defence industry sector continues to face persistent challenges. Foremost among these is a shortage of skilled personnel, particularly in specialised trades such as welding, which significantly delays critical projects.

Additionally, the industry's aging infrastructure poses significant risks, exemplified by uncertainties surrounding the future of facilities like the Scunthorpe steel plant critical to domestic materials production. Should this plant close, the UK will become the only G7 nation unable to produce steel from scratch. Persistent defence equipment procurement inefficiencies, highlighted by the troubled Ajax armoured vehicle program, further exacerbate these concerns.

Most concerning, some commentators speculate that the UK may diminish or withdraw its co-operation with Australia and the US on the shared Precision Strike Missile (PrSM) co-development project. The US Army-led PrSM program has not been the subject of any withdrawal announcements by the UK Ministry of Defence or other official sources. DTR understands, however, that in light of European priorities and a highly resource-constrained environment, the British Army may be forced to withdraw from the project. If correct, this would be a serious setback for Australia, given the significance of the PrSM program to its modernisation pathway.

While many continue to concentrate on the implications of the incoming Trump Administration, Britain's dedication to AUKUS is also facing persistent and sustained pressure. Australia must stay close to and be prepared to respond to any changes in commitment from both AUKUS partners, especially as future pressures increase around budgets, workforce upskilling, collaborative research, technology sharing and joint acquisitions. DTR