

What is AUKUS and what is it not?

How does it connect to the Quad, the Sydney Dialogue, ASEAN and Indo-Pacific security?

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Why did AUKUS happen? Because the world changed.

The Australia–UK–US partnership announced by US President Joe Biden, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison on 15 September 2021 shows how much the world has changed in just five years.¹

Back in 2016, when Australia selected a French diesel-electric design as the basis for our key deterrent weapon—our next-generation submarine—a nuclear submarine wasn't among the options considered.² That's because Australian Government and military leaders didn't see Australia's strategic environment as warranting the difficulty and complexity of acquiring and operating nuclear submarines, and because neither the US nor the UK Government would have been likely to agree to sharing nuclear submarine technologies with Australia if we had asked. Neither government has shared this technology with any other partner since they entered the US–UK nuclear partnership in 1958.³



US Navy and Royal Australian Navy personnel await the arrival of Virginia Class Submarine, USS *Hawaii* (SSN-776), at Fleet Base West in Western Australia. Photo: Department of Defence, [online](#).

A single factor explains the shift in the three governments' positions between 2016 and 2021: the now manifest systemic challenge that a powerful, aggressive Chinese state under President Xi Jinping poses to security in the Indo Pacific—and globally. Xi has made what was unthinkable in 2016 necessary in 2021. AUKUS, therefore, is about one big thing: shifting the military balance in the Indo-Pacific away from China to raise the cost to Beijing of using military power and intimidation to achieve its ends.

So, it's about reducing the likelihood of conflict in the region by strengthening credible deterrence. That's essential and urgent because Xi has already shown a willingness to make big moves fast against others' interests when he thinks he can get away with it (as we've seen in China's militarisation of the South China Sea⁴ and occupation of disputed features and areas there, in Beijing's breach of the Sino-UK treaty on Hong Kong, and in aggressive moves by China on the India–China border, in the East China Sea and in and around Taiwan).⁵ The Chinese Government is continuing to push its defence sector and its technology sector to equip the Chinese military to fight and win wars. And Xi continues to direct the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to be 'be ready to strike at a moment's notice', and the PLA's training and exercising show that it's acting on that instruction.⁶

For the US and the Biden administration, AUKUS is an emphatic demonstration that the Afghanistan withdrawal was worth the pain because it's letting the US focus time and resources on the Indo-Pacific in a way neither Barack Obama nor Donald Trump did. It shows that Biden meant what he said during his campaign to become US President: he has ended the US commitment to Afghanistan, he's seeking to rebuild the US economy through infrastructure, technology and investments that address climate change and generate economic and technological strength, and he's facing up to the challenge of China.⁷ AUKUS can give Biden some of the momentum his administration needs.

It is, as Charles Edel has written, 'a sea change in US strategic thinking towards empowering its allies, redistributing its forces around the Indo-Pacific, and better integrating its allies into its supply chains and industrial planning to deal with an increasingly aggressive China'.⁸

For the UK, AUKUS is an enormous injection into the substance of the UK's Indo-Pacific 'tilt' set out in its Integrated Review of its security, defence, development and foreign policy.⁹ It's a part of the country's post-Brexit 'Global Britain' ambition. And AUKUS connects to UK strengths—in cyber and in science and technology.

For Australia, AUKUS is a response to the government's description of Australia's deteriorating strategic environment set out in the July 2020 Defence Strategic Update,¹⁰ primarily because it's the vehicle for adding offensive power to the ADF that raises the costs to others of contemplating conflict involving Australia in the region. And it reinforces our deep alliance and security partnership with the US and the UK, again with a regional focus.

The five nots: what AUKUS isn't

AUKUS, though, is five 'nots'.

It is *not*:

1. just a pact about sharing nuclear submarine technology that leads to Australia acquiring and operating eight of those 'peak predator' deterrent weapons
2. a military alliance that contains commitments to come to each other's aid in times of crisis and conflict
3. a sidelining of the other key rising Indo-Pacific-focused minilateral: the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue involving India, the US, Japan and Australia¹¹
4. a signal that Australia seeks to be less engaged in existing regional multilateral architecture, such as ASEAN and the East Asia Summit
5. a substitute for the deep and successful Five-Eyes intelligence partnership involving the US, Canada, UK, New Zealand and Australia.

I'll take each 'not' in turn.

AUKUS has a clear agenda that includes the nuclear submarine program, but it goes beyond that into four essential areas of future but near-term military advantage: artificial intelligence, cybertechnologies, quantum technologies and undersea technologies (other than the submarines). Those focus areas of AUKUS are critical for the three nations and for security in the Indo-Pacific over the next three, five, 10 and 20 years.

Australia doesn't need a new alliance with the US (we already have the ANZUS Treaty),¹² and the Australia–UK partnership is already deep, embodying mutual expectations of consultation and assistance if either were to face conflict or crisis. The Five-Eyes partnership is central here.

The Quad partnership between four of the major powerful democracies in the Indo-Pacific has a security and technology dimension, but its central purpose is, as India's Prime Minister Modi has said, the promotion of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.¹³ This means that the Quad's agenda is as much about 'public goods' that bind the region together and promote open and transparent values and behaviours as it is about hard-edged security cooperation aimed at deterring Beijing's leaders from using military force and intimidation to achieve their ends. To the extent that AUKUS increases the military power of the US, Australia and the UK and shifts the military balance away from China in the Indo-Pacific, it's deeply complementary to the Quad and a foundational contribution to a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific. No doubt, that's why new Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has welcomed AUKUS.¹⁴

Australia will continue to be an engaged member in the regional architectures for diplomacy and dialogue on security and economics in the Indo-Pacific, notably the ASEAN-centred architecture that includes the East Asia Summit, and APEC. However, AUKUS is equally a message that, as with the Quad, Australia and the US see a crucial need to add real weight to a balancing strategy. Dialogue and cooperation are essential, but without real deterrence and a serious balancing counterweight, dialogue will achieve little, and genuine cooperation will have limits.

The Five-Eyes intelligence partnership between the US, the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand has a healthy overlap with the technology focus areas of AUKUS. High-end intelligence capabilities must involve an understanding and application of artificial intelligence and cyber and quantum technologies. However, the purpose of the Five-Eyes partnership in those technology areas is an intelligence one, and much of the cooperation is within highly classified boundaries, so approaches inside this domain don't naturally bleed into the militaries or national security communities of the Five Eyes. With AUKUS, the leaders of the US, the UK and Australia have recognised that and set out a path for faster progress for our militaries that doesn't depend on the intelligence community.

If Australia getting nuclear subs is central to AUKUS, then doesn't stronger deterrence have to wait until the 2040s?

The obvious problem for AUKUS if it were mainly about nuclear submarines as the key to shifting the military balance in the Indo-Pacific would be that eight additional nuclear attack submarines in the hands of the US and its close allies in the Indo-Pacific by themselves wouldn't shift that balance enough. And even the contribution it makes to the deterrence of conflict is some way off. Public statements from Australian naval officials since the AUKUS announcement state a goal of having at least one Australian nuclear submarine before 2040 and an ambition to have more than one by that time.¹⁵ The 19 years between now and then are almost certain to see continuing rapid growth in China's military power¹⁶ and its deployment of novel weapon systems—one example being the developmental hypersonic glide vehicle launched from space in two tests earlier this year.¹⁷

It's no coincidence, then, that AUKUS has a two-speed timetable. The slow-speed program is about nuclear submarine cooperation. The rest of the AUKUS agenda relating to artificial intelligence, cyber, quantum and undersea technologies other than the submarines is designed to shift the military balance over the 2020s and through the 2030s, with the nuclear submarine element adding further deterrent power after that.

There's little doubt that the leaders' directions to their defence organisations to accelerate getting applications of those technologies into the hands of their military personnel is a sign of frustration that that wasn't already happening at speed and scale.

What AUKUS is

AUKUS is a trilateral technology accelerator between the governments of the three nations with a ruthless focus on increasing the military power of each of our militaries by accelerating the development and application of key technologies into the hands of our service men and women. It's a trilateral that's bringing into being three other joined 'trilaterals' in each of our nations: between our governments, our research organisations and our companies—including tech firms outside the traditional defence sector. AUKUS will succeed as a technology accelerator if it keeps its focus to the particular technology streams identified in the joint leaders' statement and if the three nations, their defence organisations and research and corporate sectors understand the imperative of delivering tangible capability advantage to the US, UK and Australian militaries.

Prime Minister Morrison gave some more insight into AUKUS as a technology-focused partnership at the recent Sydney Dialogue,¹⁸ saying:

The real potential of AUKUS lies in how the new grouping can be leveraged in the long term to help Australia deal with the profound technological disruption about to sweep the world. Our trilateral efforts in AUKUS will enhance our joint capabilities and interoperability, with an initial focus on cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities.

Our officials will report back to Leaders within 90 days of our announcement with a proposed AUKUS work plan. This work plan will involve exchanges of information, personnel, and advanced technologies and capabilities; joint planning, capability development and acquisitions; joint collaboration in science and technology; and developing common and complementary security and defence-related science and industrial bases. It's a big agenda.

AUKUS is a broad and adaptable partnership that will drive our technology and capability cooperation to meet the challenges of the 21st century in our region, the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁹

Clarity on the agenda and purpose is good. Success also requires not expecting existing institutional arrangements²⁰ for force development, contracting and procurement to deliver—if they were doing so already, AUKUS wouldn't have been needed. So, AUKUS is a deep challenge to the 'incumbents', including the defence organisations, their procurement arms and the traditional defence firms in each nation, which must ask themselves why AUKUS has been seen as necessary to turbocharge getting capabilities and technologies into the hands of our militaries.

Implementing AUKUS will require new approaches to well-worn institutional arrangements within the AUKUS nations and between us. A simple example here is the Biden administration's appointment of a senior empowered official to direct AUKUS implementation and push through policy and institutional obstacles that might otherwise get in the way. President Biden has appointed Jim Miller to the US National Security Council staff, not within the US Defense Department,²¹ which is a development the other partners might emulate to ensure timely, focused implementation and direct lines of reporting to our respective national leaders that enable their rapid directions and decisions as and when needed. Other novel arrangements, such as particular capability programs being implemented outside usual capability and procurement processes, using DARPA²² or Special Capabilities Program²³ approaches across the AUKUS partnership, will be needed too.

The principle here is to avoid the 'Einstein (or AI Anon) trap' of expecting previous processes and approaches to deliver faster and different results compared to what they have before (the definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing and expect different results).²⁴

On purpose and urgency, there's a simple performance metric for AUKUS implementers over the next three years. On 20 January 2025, when the Australian prime minister calls whoever is the US president on that day, AUKUS must have become such

a successful piece of the furniture, with tangible results that have generated broad institutional, political and corporate support that, regardless of how warm or testy this leaders' phone call is (think Turnbull-Trump in January 2017),²⁵ AUKUS's momentum continues.

Implementation and success can be in some unexpected areas. AI is one of the core priorities set by national leaders and the default thought here may well be AI applied to weapon systems and semi-autonomous and autonomous vehicles of different types. That's absolutely relevant, however, successful mature AI applications without the ethical challenges of weapon system use are in everyday use in many large commercial enterprises (like Amazon, Walmart, Coles and Woolworths) for business processes that our UK, US and Australian defence organisations have too. So, an area for quick wins on applied AI under AUKUS is in the 'back office' business processes of our militaries – examples being logistics and even establishment and personnel management. Gartner's²⁶ emerging technology roadmap for large enterprises is a source of advice about mature solutions here.

Interestingly, AUKUS is likely to add momentum to other initiatives between Australia, the US, the UK and perhaps our other Quad partners, particularly in the area of defence posture and cooperation on sustaining operational presence in the Indo-Pacific. While swamped by the AUKUS announcement, the annual AUSMIN meeting between Australian and US foreign affairs and defence counterparts included clear ambitions to increase US force presence and operation through Australian facilities.²⁷ Defence Minister Dutton went further than that in the AUSMIN press conference, openly canvassing expanded air, maritime and broader force posture cooperation, saying 'if that includes basing and includes the storage of different ordnances, I think that is in Australia's best interest, our national interest, at this point in time.'²⁸ For those who understand the history of the US presence in Australia, that mention of basing—and the low-key reaction to it in Australia—are major new developments, with the result probably being not US bases, but joint Australian-US facilities.

The expansion of Australian facilities for joint use by the US, the UK and Quad partners would be a further practical step in resetting the military balance in the Indo-Pacific. While Australian nuclear submarines will take longer, even the facilities aspects of the submarine cooperation could increase the ability of UK and US submarines to operate out of Australian facilities well before the first Australian nuclear submarine enters service.

The Biden administration's low-key announcement on the outcomes of its Global Posture Review supports this approach, which could be fast-tracked by upfront Australian investment.²⁹ While short on specifics, the Pentagon's announcement that President Biden has accepted its recommendations included the statement that:

It is no surprise that the Indo-Pacific is the priority region for the review, given [Secretary Austin's] focus on China as America's pacing challenge. The review directs additional cooperation with allies and partners to advance initiatives that contribute to regional stability and deter Chinese military aggression and threats from North Korea. These initiatives include seeking greater regional access for military partnership activities, enhancing infrastructure in Guam and Australia and prioritizing military construction across the Pacific Islands. They also include new US rotational aircraft deployments and logistics cooperation in Australia.

That type of increased cooperation can be an early deliverable that adds to regional deterrence well inside the timeline for the submarine program.

What does AUKUS mean for the Indo-Pacific and for 'non-AUKUS' security groupings?

In the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN members have expressed diverse views on the new partnership. Indonesia and Malaysia have expressed a mix of concern about the potential destabilisation that nuclear submarines might cause³⁰ and an understanding of and respect for the purpose of AUKUS in underpinning security,³¹ while others are at least quietly welcoming, despite low-key official statements.³² At the ASEAN-Australia Summit, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said:

Singapore welcomes new regional architecture formulations that support ASEAN centrality, deepen economic integration, and promote a stable and secure Asia-Pacific region and a rules-based order, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. We welcome Australia's assurance that its AUKUS partnership with the US and UK will be consistent with these criteria.³³

Overall, this demonstrates an understanding about the value of balancing Chinese power, and about that balancing being done outside the previously existing dialogue and engagement architecture.

The strengthening of deterrence in the Indo-Pacific seems to already be having an effect. It may already be enabling discussions in the existing dialogue forums, such as the ASEAN–China Summit, to be more frank and more productive. Philippines President Duterte was able to say in reference to Chinese coastguard water-cannoning of Philippines vessels that ‘We abhor the recent event in the Ayungin Shoal and view with grave concern other similar developments. This does not speak well of the relations between our nations and our partnership,’ in the same meeting where China’s Xi Jinping extolled Chinese behaviour in the area, stating that China ‘would always be a good neighbour’ and would ‘not bully’ ASEAN states.³⁴

In conversations with Scott Morrison, the leaders of both Japan and India have welcomed AUKUS as a positive development and seen the complementarity between it and the Quad.³⁵ India’s response has included openness to working even more closely with its already close security partner, France, as well as to recommitting to the Quad. Prime Minister Modi has since given a keynote address to the new government–technology forum—the Sydney Dialogue—hosted for the first time by Australia.

Japan’s Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, has welcomed the ‘defence deal’ that is AUKUS and committed to strengthening the Quad through Japan’s participation.³⁶ Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has said that he welcomes the creation of AUKUS because it’s evidence of like-minded countries being engaged in the Indo-Pacific in the long term.³⁷ He has also advocated for Japan to ‘engage in cooperation under the AUKUS in such areas as cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence and quantum technologies’.

AUKUS and European partners with Indo-Pacific strategies

The tension that AUKUS has provoked among the partners,³⁸ most notably Australia³⁹ and France flowing from the loss by the French of a \$90 billion conventional submarine program, has played out in ugly, angry and personal ways between leaders, including on the margins of the recent G-20 and Glasgow COP26 events.⁴⁰

In the short term, this has disrupted the growing cooperation on the China challenge between the AUKUS partners and France⁴¹ and also complicated the EU’s and its member states’ engagement, despite the growing number of European nations with Indo-Pacific policies, strategies⁴² and guidelines⁴³ and the recent EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁴ This is likely to be a less important disruption in the medium term, however, as the force driving the convergence between the EU, individual European states and the AUKUS partners is a common assessment of the systemic challenge from China.

AUKUS, the Quad and the Sydney Dialogue: three new kinds of ‘minilateral’ that add to the political, technological and security architecture of the Indo-Pacific

AUKUS is a new ‘minilateral’ that joins a small set of other Indo-Pacific-focused minilateral partnerships that Australia works within. The Quad and the Australia–Japan–US trilateral are key examples. Most obviously, AUKUS is a powerful statement about the priority of the Indo-Pacific and the systemic challenge of China for the three partners, reinforcing the assessments driving the Quad partners’ increasingly deep cooperation.

These minilaterals have different purposes and agendas but, managed well, are mutually reinforcing. They’re a way of conducting ‘fast multilateralism’.⁴⁵ They allow the particular groupings in each to pursue specific agendas in which the partners have strong common interests and are willing to apply resources to advance them with a sense of urgency. This means that the minilaterals can move faster and do more than wider multilateral groups. The UK’s deeper engagement and presence in the Indo-Pacific through its ‘Indo Pacific tilt’ set out in its recent Integrated Review makes it a welcome partner for the other, non-AUKUS, groupings.

From an Australian perspective, there’s a new security, technological and economic cooperation architecture in the combination of AUKUS (which is all about technology acceleration for national security purposes), the Quad and the new Sydney Dialogue, which brings together governments and their private-sector technology partners.

The Quad is a wider partnership than AUKUS in its scope and ambition, and, as its agenda shows, is focused on important ‘public goods’ that address the Indo-Pacific’s most pressing problems—the Covid-19 pandemic and supply-chain assurance being two.

The Sydney Dialogue is a new annual forum that brings together the governments of powerful and prosperous democracies and some of their most important technology firms to work in partnership on how new technologies (including those on the Quad and AUKUS agendas) can best support prosperity, security and openness. It’s a new kind of minilateral that includes world-leading tech firms in its foundational operation and concept, not just governments. Interestingly, the Sydney Dialogue is the minilateral that’s probably the most open to new members—states and technology firms. Israel (the ‘start-up’ nation) and South Korea (a government–tech powerhouse) would logically be very welcome additions.

The rise and increasing priority of these minilateral groupings is a challenge to existing broader groups such as NATO, the G-20 and the wider set of US alliance machinery, just as it is to the existing multilateral groupings in the Indo-Pacific.

The minilaterals are a statement that the larger institutional groupings aren’t acting with the common purpose and speed that the current strategic and technological environments demand, just as the current institutional arrangements for capability development and delivery within the AUKUS partners have also not delivered what’s now required. How NATO responds, and whether small partner groupings within NATO and the EU also seek a ‘minilateral’ approach while also working within the larger groups, is probably the subject of analysis and perhaps decisions in various capitals.

There’s more to like about AUKUS than merely the utility of nuclear submarines.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ADF	Australian Defence Force
APEC	Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AUKUS	Australia – United Kingdom – United States
EU	European Union
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PLA	People's Liberation Army
Quad	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

About the author

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