

AUKUS: A View from Washington

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The AUKUS security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States made a worldwide splash when it was announced in September 2021. While none of the three national leaders mentioned the word ‘China’ in their announcement, the shared threat perceptions of these three countries over Beijing’s ambitions catalyzed the decision in a new era of strategic competition. The centerpiece of the partnership will be a historic project to develop nuclear-propulsion submarines for the Royal Australian Navy. While more details continue to emerge, we can already draw a few takeaways for the United States.

For Washington, the AUKUS partnership represents a significant moment in its alliance building in the 21st century. The UK and Australia¹ are the closest US diplomatic and defense allies. The three countries are partners in the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing arrangement (along with Canada and New Zealand) and military operational efforts such as Combined Maritime Forces in the Western Indian Ocean, and tend to vote together on controversial decisions in international diplomatic forums such as the UN General Assembly. The decision for the US and the UK to share exclusive nuclear reactor technology with Australia brings Washington even closer to these critical allies.

Still, an important reminder is that, despite the high-profile announcement, the next step of this partnership commits the three governments to ‘an 18-month consultation period’² in which they will study how to operationalize this submarine project. The three countries must navigate various technological, legal, personnel, domestic political, and diplomatic challenges, plus the added pressure to ‘build nuclear submarines as rapidly as possible’.³ This is a tightrope act that will be continually scrutinized by observers.

A question that should be asked, even if not popular at this moment of progress in trilateral alliance relations, is how changes in political leadership might affect this arrangement. Operationalizing the partnership will be hard enough. One needs look no further than the problems with maintaining the Quad⁴ more than a decade ago, when the new Rudd government withdrew Australia’s participation.⁵ Since then, the view of China as a competitor to the US has found bipartisan consensus in Washington across both the Trump and Biden administrations. However, a change in leadership in Canberra or London, especially in the period before the submarines are realized, could raise similar questions about a new government’s commitment to this trilateral partnership.

One immediate consequence that the United States has had to manage is the fallout of the agreement with its other major European ally, France. Yet, counterintuitively, this episode could lay the foundation for greater alliance cooperation between France and the US. France's actions⁶ after the AUKUS partnership was announced were viewed by many as excessive, but they have been effective in conveying a sense of obligation in Washington to remedy the bilateral relationship. As a country at the forefront of developing strategy⁷ towards the Indo-Pacific region over the past decade, France should rightly be seen as a critical regional partner. But this has not been the case. In the 2017 *US National Security Strategy*, France was mentioned only in a European context but not in the discussion on the Indo-Pacific region. In the State Department's 2019 *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, France was not mentioned at all. Acknowledging France's role in the region in the next US national security strategy and national defense strategy would be a meaningful step forward in the relationship.⁸ Beyond national strategy, including France in a future MALABAR naval exercise with the Quad countries – US, Australia, India, and Japan – would be another option for acknowledging the role of France in a vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific.⁹ AUKUS could even conduct its own exercise, possibly inviting France, as well as India and Japan, to participate as well. If India and Japan were to agree, then France's inclusion would set the stage for, in effect, Quad plus France and UK demonstrations of naval power across the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

In addition to reassuring France, the US must be mindful of how AUKUS is perceived in New Delhi. India may be concerned that the emergence of the security partnership could inadvertently usher in a new era of Beijing-Islamabad undersea cooperation to include nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs). AUKUS could light a fire under India to gain SSNs on a permanent basis. It has historically secured leases of the nuclear-powered INS *Chakra* submarines from Russia, and France has offered to help on the co-development of SSNs. Moreover, India is already a nuclear-armed power, with its own Arihant-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN). France's Naval Group continues to co-develop India's Kalvari-class diesel-electric attack submarines¹⁰ based on the French Scorpène-class design, even after the 2016 leak of sensitive details about the project.¹¹ In November 2021, the Indian Navy took possession of the fourth in this class, with two additional submarines in development. In terms of navy-to-navy cooperation, both India and France participate in the annual bilateral VARUNA exercise, and diplomatically, both countries embrace their paths of 'strategic autonomy' in international affairs.¹² As a result, they are well-suited partners in defense technological, operational, and ideational terms.

A longer-term implication of AUKUS is the potential impact on US military access to Diego Garcia, which Washington will need to renew in 2036. The small island nation of Mauritius is engaged in a dispute with the UK over the sovereignty of the Chagos Archipelago, ratcheting up victories in international legal forums.¹³ Mauritius has indicated that it would

be willing to agree to a 99-year lease of Diego Garcia to the US to accommodate any concerns about a possible handover of the Chagos.¹⁴ However, the Biden administration is continuing the US's longstanding stance of backing its close ally's sovereignty over this territory.¹⁵ AUKUS may make Washington even less likely to consider negotiating a separate access agreement with Mauritius. Based on comments by the head of Britain's Royal Navy and a 2021 port visit by the HMS *Queen Elizabeth* carrier strike group, the UK appears interested in using the Diego Garcia base in the future.¹⁶ Short of a change in the UK's stance on claiming it as British Indian Ocean Territory, Washington appears to be opting for alliance management with its close defense and intelligence partner over the appearance of abiding by international legal norms.¹⁷

The AUKUS announcement overall demonstrates the priority of US alliance building for the coming decade. The partnership strengthens US relations with its closest allies across military operational, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic lines, expanding to significant defense technology development. However, AUKUS also presents challenges for US relations with other important allies and partners. An immediate challenge will be transforming the fallout with France into an opportunity for cooperation in forthcoming US national strategy documents and operations in the Indo-Pacific. Another near-term challenge will be managing concerns in New Delhi about AUKUS catalyzing greater cooperation between China and Pakistan on submarine platforms. A longer-term implication of Washington's deepened alliance relationship with the UK is that AUKUS may make it even less likely that the US would be willing to consider a separate agreement with Mauritius for access to Diego Garcia. In addition to these near- and long-term challenges, Washington will face great scrutiny over whether AUKUS's objective of delivering nuclear-powered submarines to Australia will even be feasible in a time frame that is useful for the fleet. For many observers, the realization of this vision will serve as an indicator of allied success in the coming decade of strategic competition.

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The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and not of any organization with which she is affiliated.

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