

AUKUS and the Indian Ocean: An Australian Perspective

David Brewster

The September 2021 announcement of AUKUS, a new security arrangement between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, came as a surprise to analysts around the world. It was a bold move, although the shape and parameters of the arrangement are still vague. Nevertheless, it could have important consequences for security in the Indian Ocean and elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific.

Before discussing these potential consequences, it is important to note what AUKUS is and what it is not (at least so far).

First, AUKUS is not a new military alliance. All three countries are already close allies, connected through a series of alliance treaties (e.g. NATO, ANZUS, Five Power Defence Arrangements), bilateral and multilateral intelligence sharing arrangements (e.g. Five Eyes), and, most importantly, longstanding traditions of mutual military support in conflicts around the world. Even without AUKUS, the three countries may already be the most 'allied' of allies anywhere. So, it is not terribly useful to think about AUKUS as a 'new' military alliance.

Second, AUKUS is, in formal terms, a technology-sharing arrangement covering a broad range of military and non-military technologies. The media headlines focused on the US and UK sharing their 'crown jewels' of nuclear submarine propulsion with Australia. This is a major step and is comparable with Washington's decision to share nuclear technology with the UK during some of the darkest days of the Cold War. In that sense, it is an important manifestation of US commitment to the Indo-Pacific and its determination to respond to China's aggression and threats.

For Australia, gaining access to some of the world's most advanced nuclear submarine technology may be a once-in-a-generation opportunity, making it the only non-nuclear weapons state in the world that operates nuclear-powered submarines. In some ways, it may propel middle power Australia into a bigger league.

But the arrangement involves much broader cooperation in technology, including in artificial intelligence and quantum and much deeper integration of security and defence-related science, technology and industrial bases. The parameters of this are yet to be determined, but it signals an important step for the United States in its competition with China. For Australia, gaining access to this inner technology circle may ultimately be considerably more important than the nuclear submarine technology.

Third, beyond technology sharing, the AUKUS arrangement also signals much closer strategic coordination between the three countries in the Indo-Pacific, a region where Britain has been largely absent for decades. The US and Australia, which already work closely throughout the region, will now need to scramble to fit Britain into their Indo-Pacific planning as a first-ranking partner that can shoulder some regional security responsibilities. The 2021 visit to the Indian and Pacific Oceans of the *Queen Elizabeth* naval task force was just a first step in the UK's new Indo-Pacific strategy.

Fourth, while AUKUS has been announced as a core group of three countries, there is no inherent reason why it could not in the future be extended to include other key partners. Indeed, there are some key regional partners that probably should be brought on board in due course. From Australia's perspective it will be important that AUKUS is not perceived in the region as just an Anglo-Saxon club.

So what are the potential consequences of AUKUS for the Indian Ocean?

The first, and most obvious consequence comes from the eventual commissioning of eight Australian SSNs, principally based at Fremantle in Western Australia (although this may not occur for many years). Assuming that it all comes to pass, it would involve a significant change in the balance of power in the Indian Ocean. Among other things it would be a massive enhancement to Australia's strike capabilities throughout its area of strategic interest that covers a large portion of the earth's surface, ranging from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, the Korean peninsula and the Pacific Islands (and south to Antarctica). A sizeable fleet of Australian SSNs based in Fremantle may make China's surface and submarine fleet in the Indian Ocean considerably more vulnerable than it already is. This could have deterrence value in connection with potential Chinese adventurism throughout the Indo-Pacific.

A second consequence flows from Australia's decision to terminate its existing contract with France to design and build twelve large, conventionally-powered, submarines. This decision was probably inevitable in light of major problems in delivery of the submarines, and indeed may have been delayed only because of a lack of other options. However there is no doubt that in diplomatic terms the announcement of the decision was handled very badly by the Australian government.

The French government reacted to the AUKUS announcement by freezing its burgeoning strategic relationship with Australia as well as the nascent Australia-India-France trilateral partnership. It is too early to say how long France will continue with this position, but at least for the moment it puts on hold what could have been a fruitful and important regional partnership. France has also responded by doubling down on its existing partnership with India.

Third, as previously noted, the AUKUS arrangement signals US and Australian support for the UK to play a much more significant role in the Indo-Pacific. This was already evident with the deployment of the *Queen Elizabeth* task force and London's decision to return to the permanent deployment of a small naval force in the region. The inclusion of US surface ships and embarked US aircraft in the task force likely presages an integrated force with the United States and Australia.

The UK is also looking to build its relationship with Japan as a key Indo-Pacific partner, and will be seeking to partner with other countries in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, including assistance to help develop their capabilities and resilience against perceived threats from China.

Fourth, consistent with the AUKUS arrangement (although not necessarily strictly part of it), there will be a further build-up of US defence forces in Australia, including rotational deployments of air assets in northern Australia and, most likely, submarine and surface naval forces at Fremantle in Western Australia. Australia has been seeking this for some time. This will provide the United States with additional strategic depth in responding to developments in the Western Pacific (e.g. Taiwan, South China Sea). It will also assist the United States to better swing its forces between the Pacific and Indian Ocean theatres, thus placing it in a better position to respond to developments in the Indian Ocean.

Fifth, Australia's acquisition of nuclear submarine technology could give greater impetus to several other Indo-Pacific countries acquiring their own nuclear-powered submarine fleet. South Korea is already actively pursuing an SSN construction program. It is not inconceivable that Japan (with support from the US) and even Pakistan (with Chinese support) could also pursue their own programs. This would provide a significant new element to the current conventional 'submarine race' by many countries in the region.

Sixth, are the consequences of sharing of other technologies between the AUKUS partners and, potentially, other partners. This is much more difficult to forecast, but it may presage a world of where technologies and networks are more formally divided between two blocs.

As stated, the ultimate shape and parameters of the AUKUS arrangement are yet to be determined. But it will almost certainly have a major strategic impact on the Indian Ocean, including Australia's role in that region.

David Brewster is a Senior Research Fellow with the National Security College, Australian National University, where he works on Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific maritime security.