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AUKUS: a Commonwealth perspective

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ABSTRACT
The Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) partnership arose because of Australia's need to replace its ageing submarine fleet, opting for nuclear-powered submarines to be built with American and British assistance. Perceptions of a deteriorating strategic situation vis-à-vis China were a major factor in this decision. Through AUKUS, the United Kingdom will also acquire additional submarines and expand its strategic role in the Indo/Asia-Pacific region. In addition to the submarine plan, AUKUS has a focus on the development of advanced defence technology. AUKUS has significant implications for Asian and Pacific Commonwealth countries, with their responses reflecting their strategic outlooks and perceived defence needs,

KEYWORDS
AUKUS; Commonwealth; Australia; United Kingdom; submarines; defence technology

Introduction

The initiation and further development of the AUKUS (Australia-United Kingdom-United States) arrangement have led to much debate and discussion, particularly in Australia. AUKUS began with the joint announcement on 15–16 September 2021 by President Joe Biden and Scott Morrison and Boris Johnson, the then prime ministers of Australia and the United Kingdom, respectively, that their governments were establishing 'an enhanced trilateral security partnership' (United States, The White House, 2021). The three governments would work together in the first instance to deliver new nuclear-powered submarines for Australia. However, there would also be a focus on cooperation in the development of advanced defence technology, covering 'cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities'.

The AUKUS arrangement arose in the first instance from Australia's need to replace or upgrade its ageing fleet of six Collins submarines, acquired in the 1990s. The decision of the centre-right Coalition government headed by Malcolm Turnbull (prime minister, 2015–2018) in 2016 had been to work with France to obtain twelve new submarines. These were to be a conventional version of the nuclear-powered *Barracuda* class submarine. The estimated cost was AUD 50 billion, with delivery expected by the mid-2020s. Concerns about the adequacy of this plan led to the Coalition government under Scott Morrison (prime minister, 2018–2022) abandoning the contract and developing a new scheme to

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acquire nuclear-powered submarines in conjunction with the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US). Strategically, Australia had long been aligned with both countries, although the UK dimension had diminished considerably since British withdrawal from 'east of Suez' in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The inner circle of the Morrison government secretly developed the plan to switch to nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS auspices. Morrison gave notice to the Labor leadership in federal parliament only twenty-four hours ahead of the announcement of AUKUS; Biden wanted bipartisan support in Australia before proceeding. Labor fell into line with virtually no debate within the parliamentary caucus. Following Labor success in the federal elections of May 2022, it has fallen to the new government under Anthony Albanese to undertake the further planning required for the submarine project.

While clearly AUKUS has been a major issue for Australia, it obviously very much involves the UK and the US. In assessing the issue, one can focus in the first instance on the situation that led to the initial AUKUS announcement, and then on the subsequent development of the arrangement, especially the planning for the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines by Australia. The joint announcement by the three AUKUS leaders on 13–14 March 2023 is particularly significant in this respect. As well as the change from Morrison to Albanese in Australia, by this stage Rishi Sunak (Conservative) was British prime minister, with Biden remaining as US president.

The article begins with a discussion of the relevant strategic context in Asia-Pacific and the broader Indo-Pacific. It then examines developments concerning the AUKUS initiative, with particular reference to the debate in Australia. There is also an assessment of the involvement of the United Kingdom and a review of the responses to AUKUS by significant countries in the Asian Commonwealth (India in South Asia; Malaysia and Singapore in Southeast Asia) and the Pacific Commonwealth (New Zealand and the Pacific island members). The Commonwealth focus in this article means only limited reference to various non-Commonwealth countries that are involved in or affected by AUKUS (most notably the US as an AUKUS partner, China as the implicit potential adversary, and regional Asian powers such as Japan and Indonesia).

There is no claim that AUKUS has been a Commonwealth issue. It has not featured on the agenda for the Commonwealth Secretariat, and nor was it mentioned in the communiqué and leaders' statement from the Kigali CHOGM (Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting) in Rwanda in July 2022. There is a vague reference in the CHOGM communiqué to the Commonwealth upholding 'international peace and security' (The Commonwealth, 2022, p. 2, para. 5), but mostly CHOGM focused on 'new international agenda' issues such as governance, human rights and rule of law, sustainability (including climate change), health, the role of youth, and technology and innovation. The argument here is that AUKUS has been significant for a number of Commonwealth members, particularly Australia and the United Kingdom, while also having an impact beyond those immediately involved.

I argue that AUKUS and the planned development of nuclear-powered submarines represent a very important shift in Australia's international engagement, binding Australia more closely to US strategy in the Asia-Pacific, especially in relation to China. For the United Kingdom, there are perceived benefits for its defence industry and its post-Brexit 'global Britain' aspirations. For the Asian Commonwealth and Pacific

Commonwealth members, the relevance of AUKUS varies, with the various countries assessing AUKUS developments in terms of their more general strategic outlook.

The strategic context

Given the centrality of Australia in AUKUS, the focus here is on the strategic outlook in Asia-Pacific and the Indo-Pacific as seen from Australia. However, I will also give attention to the British strategic outlook as it relates to this super-region.

Keeping in mind that the immediate occasion for AUKUS was the question of the replacement for the Collins-class submarines, any decision on that matter needed to give attention to the strategic purpose of the replacement. Between the decision of 2016 in favour of French-designed conventional submarines and the shift to nuclear-powered AUKUS submarines, the strategic situation in Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific had deteriorated. In particular, there was a significant downturn in Australia's relations with China. While China remained Australia's most important trade partner (30.2% of exports and 22.6% of imports in 2021–2022 [Australia, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023a]), there were allegations of undue Chinese interference in Australian domestic politics, concerns about China's more assertive policy (the 'wolf warrior') over issues such as Taiwan, Hong Kong and the South China Sea, and then claims that China had been unduly secretive in relation to the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic at the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020 (with Australia calling publicly for an enquiry by the World Health Organization into China's complicity in this matter in April 2020). The Turnbull government sponsored foreign interference legislation largely directed against China (the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act of 2018), also banning the participation of the Chinese company Huawei in the rollout of the 5G mobile network in Australia. China responded by imposing restrictions on Australian exports to China, covering barley, beef and lamb, wine, cotton, lobsters, timber and coal (Sullivan, 2020). Iron ore, Australia's single most important export to China (where alternative sources were limited) remained exempt.

Apart from this deterioration in the bilateral relationship between Australia and China, the situation as between the US and China as the two major powers in the region became worse. The decline in Sino-US relations began during the Trump administration (2017–2021), with President Trump attempting to counter perceived unfair advantages China had in the trade relationship (imposing various restrictions on Chinese exports to the US); this policy continued under the Biden administration that took office in January 2021. The geopolitical relationship between the two powers also deteriorated, partly because the US saw its own position declining relative to 'rising' China but also because China was becoming more assertive over the Taiwan issue. China claimed Taiwan, effectively independent since the inconclusive 'end' to the Chinese civil war in 1949–1950, as a province of China. While the US recognised the principle of 'one China' from the time of the Shanghai communiqué in 1972, it also wanted the issue dealt with by peaceful means, meanwhile bolstering Taiwan's defences with arms sales. In the face of China's increasingly assertive stance and unwillingness to forego the use of force, the US policy of 'strategic ambiguity' in relation to Taiwan began to crumble, with the US strengthening its support for Taiwan. Given the Australian alliance with the US, the

deterioration in Sino-US relations had important implications, complementing and extending the decline in Sino-Australian relations.

From a British perspective, there were also implications relating to China's more assertive stance and the worsening in Sino-US relations. While the UK is geographically outside the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific, any developments affecting the US also have implications for Britain given the importance of the alliance with the US through NATO, not to mention the perception of a 'special relationship' with the US. The distance from London to Beijing is shorter than the distance from Melbourne or Sydney to Beijing. In the context of 'global Britain', there was an argument that the UK should be doing more in the wider world, contributing to global security in geopolitically important regions such as the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific. China was significant not just in its regional context but on the global level. A global Britain needed to have a China policy, with both geopolitical and economic dimensions; on the latter aspect, one can note that China ranks as Britain's top source for imports, with 13.3% of British imports from that source in 2021 (Australia, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023b).

More specific AUKUS-related developments derived from Australian and British strategic outlooks will be discussed subsequently.

Australia

Since AUKUS arose in the first instance because of Australian concerns about replacing the ageing Collins-class submarine fleet (six boats), an appropriate starting point for discussing AUKUS is the debate within Australia. While AUKUS concerns more than submarines, decisions made by the Australian government about replacement submarines inevitably have an impact on Australia's role strategically within its wider region (note that in terms of technology, AUKUS covers advanced defence technology as well as submarines).

On the issue of the submarines, the key issue is why the Morrison government found the contract for French-designed conventional submarines unsatisfactory and furthermore why it came to favour nuclear-powered submarines built in conjunction with the US and UK. Organising the design and construction of conventional submarines based on the original *Barracuda* nuclear-powered submarine was a complex and drawn out process but was nearing completion at the time of the AUKUS announcement. Part of the cost to Australia was a falling out with President Emmanuel Macron of France who alleged deception on Morrison's part. Australia agreed eventually to pay AUD 835 million because of the broken contract with France's Naval Group (Doran, 2022).

It appears that on top of the difficulties with the protracted negotiations with France, the Morrison government became convinced that it would be in Australia's interests to have a more invulnerable and longer-range submarine. Discussions began in the Australian Department of Defence in March 2020 (Hall, 2022, p. 40). The more ambitious technical requirements related to perceptions of where Australia stood in relation to China; one can assume strong 'China threat' and pro-US alliance attitudes within the Department of Defence. A nuclear-powered submarine would be the best option, but this required the cooperation of the US to make the relevant technology available; the UK was willing to assist and could derive benefits for its own defence industry and the geopolitical role it sought (see below). Given that the US made relevant nuclear technology

available to Britain (as it had done since 1958), the British government needed US permission to make such technology available to Australia.[1] From the US perspective, a new Australian fleet of nuclear-powered submarines that could operate off the coast of China would tie Australia more to US strategy vis-à-vis China, effectively increasing the size of the US submarine fleet arrayed against China. From the Australian perspective, the concerns about China's increasing power in the region (as previously outlined) provided the strategic context for the thinking underpinning the Morrison government's shift towards nuclear-powered submarines.

The announcement of the AUKUS partnership raised major issues for Australian foreign policy. There was little debate in the parliamentary Labor Party because the leadership responded so quickly in the affirmative. Labor was 'locked in' to the position adopted by the Coalition. As fate would have it, it has been a Labor government that since May 2022 has had the responsibility for implementing the AUKUS plan for nuclear-powered submarines, keeping in mind that this plan is the centrepiece of a significant shift towards enhanced cooperation with Australia's long term 'great and powerful friends' (to use prime minister Robert Menzies's expression from the 1950s). Alongside this shift, Australia is also putting more emphasis on a 'forward defence' strategy, which again has echoes of the 1950s and 1960s.

With little questioning in the parliamentary Labor Party, the most significant opposition to AUKUS has come from Labor luminaries outside federal parliament, most notably Paul Keating (prime minister, 1991–1996). In a fiery speech to the National Press Club in Canberra on 15 March 2023, Keating described AUKUS as the worst foreign policy decision by a Labor government since the conscription issue in World War I (Keating, 2023). His main concern was the way in which AUKUS locked Australia into US strategy in the Asia-Pacific, undermining Australia's strategic autonomy.[2]

Keating had attacked Penny Wong (foreign minister) as 'seriously unwise', but she responded diplomatically in her own address to the National Press Club on 17 April 2023 (Wong, 2023). While she argued for Australia acting to enhance the prospects for peace in the region, by preserving the status quo over issues such as Taiwan, she also saw value in 'strategic equilibrium' and 'deterrence' to which AUKUS contributed. Keating dismissed her address as 'platitudes' (Hurst, 2023a). Wong has been very active as foreign minister, arguing for a stronger role for diplomacy in Australian foreign policy, but clearly also a major influence on the government's position on AUKUS.

While there has been little questioning of AUKUS within the Labor caucus in Canberra, it is possible that there will be a resolution on the matter at the next national conference of the ALP (Australian Labor Party), scheduled for August 2023. This could be along the lines of supporting AUKUS, subject to Australia's strategic autonomy being upheld. Defence minister Richard Marles has said that the new submarine fleet will be under Australian command (Wright & Foley, 2023), but politically it would be difficult not to use these assets in support of the US should there be major conflict between the US and China, or even war.[3]

As announced on 13–14 March 2023, Australia would from the early 2030s buy three (and up to five) *Virginia*-class nuclear-powered submarines from the US at a discounted rate, subject to the approval of the US Congress.[4] This would be an interim measure until the proposed new AUKUS submarines were built; Australia would contribute billions of dollars to US shipyards to facilitate the construction schedule. From as early as 2027 the

US will rotate up to four of its *Virginia*-class submarines to the Stirling naval base near Perth, with the UK rotating one of its *Astute* submarines (of which it has five[5]). Up to eight AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines would be built for Australia and a yet to be determined number for the UK. The initial work would be at the Barrow-in-Furness shipyards in northwest England, with Australia contributing to the costs there, and Australia then building its own submarines at the naval dockyards in Adelaide. Australia would not have its first AUKUS submarine until the early 2040s. The estimated cost was up to AUD368 billion (USD245 billion), itself a point of controversy given that the overall defence budget will need to increase,[6] and funds available for areas such as social security, health, education and infrastructure will be less.

While discussions of AUKUS focus with good reason on plans for the development of nuclear-powered submarines, there has been considerable activity relating to other aspects of advanced defence technology. In April 2022, the AUKUS partners announced additional areas for technological cooperation, covering hypersonic and counter-hypersonic systems, electronic warfare, innovation and information-sharing (Hellyer & Stevens, 2022, p. 5). This fits in with the description of AUKUS as a 'trilateral technology accelerator' rather than a military alliance (Shoebridge, 2021, p. 4).

While it was likely to take until the 2050s before Australia had the full complement of possibly eight nuclear-powered submarines, the strategic impact would be to enhance the forces that could counter China in the event of conflict. While the US might expand the two to four attack submarines it currently has in Asian waters ('Great AUKUS'), an additional eight Australian submarines plus one British submarine would have significant impact on the regional military balance. Australia has clearly signalled its position well before new nuclear-powered submarines appear on the scene. Australia is lining up even more closely with the US, while also participating in groupings such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) implicitly directed against China (Japan and India participate in the Quad, in addition to the US and Australia).

An important issue relating to AUKUS concerns the implications for nuclear proliferation. The high energy uranium (HEU) used in American and British nuclear-powered submarines (and the proposed AUKUS submarines) could be diverted for making nuclear weapons. This was more difficult with low energy uranium (LEU) as used in the French nuclear-powered submarines. With the submarines using HEU, the power source lasted for the life of the submarine; submarines using LEU needed their power source replenished after several years of use. Article 4 of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) of 1968 allows the 'use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes' (United Nations, Office of Disarmament Affairs, 2023). The proposed submarines will not be carrying nuclear weapons but are using nuclear power as a means of propulsion; this can be justified as a 'peaceful use' and Australia has done so. However, critics argued that an unscrupulous state might use Article 4 as a screen for becoming a nuclear weapons state, acquiring HEU nuclear-powered submarines in the first instance. Under Australia's Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA) with the International Atomic Energy Agency, the agency will ensure that Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines is in accord with Article 4 of the NPT (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2023).

The strategic thinking underpinning Australian participation in AUKUS went one step further with the publication of Australia's Defence Strategic Review in April 2023 (Australian Government, 2023). Confirming a shift from the earlier

'defence of Australia' doctrine (advanced most clearly in Australia's 1987 defence white paper), the focus was now on 'national defence' but emphasising the need for long-range power projection. 'Defence of Australia' had meant protecting the Australian mainland (and Tasmania) and Australia's near approaches. The proposed shift meant cutting back on equipment sought by the Australian army for use in land warfare, with a recommended reduction in the acquisition of new infantry fighting vehicles from 450 to 129 (p. 59, para. 8.35). The review argued for 'an enhanced long-range strike capability in all domains' (p. 19), including not just the planned AUKUS submarines, but also a significant force of long-range missiles.

Alongside AUKUS, one saw a shift whereby Australia would become more closely integrated with US defence arrangements in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific, including the rotation of US forces through northern Australia and the preparation of Australian airfields for possible use by the United States Air Force. Increasingly, Australia, despite its location, was effectively a NATO member. Ironically, Australia ahead of the conclusion of the ANZUS Treaty in 1951 had wanted an agreement akin to the North Atlantic Treaty with its 'an armed attack on one ... [is] an attack against them all' wording (Article 5) rather than simply a commitment to consult if such circumstances should arise in the 'Pacific area' as specified under the ANZUS Treaty (Article 5) (Barclay, 1985, p. 45, 53).

United Kingdom

AUKUS gives the United Kingdom a significant role as a factor in Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific security, as well as a means for strengthening British defence industry.

As far as the first aspect is concerned, the post-Brexit ambition for a 'global Britain' is relevant. More specifically in relation to security in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific, a good guide to official thinking is the British government's integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy, presented in March 2021 (HM Government [HMG], 2021). After presenting an overview of the UK's international engagement as 'a European country with global interests', there is a whole section in the review entitled 'The Indo-Pacific tilt: a framework'. The rationale for this 'tilt' is partly the pursuit of 'economic opportunities', but security is also a concern, with the report seeing the Indo-Pacific at the centre of intensifying geopolitical competition with multiple potential flashpoints' (HMG, 2021, p. 66). Although expressed in general terms, one point under recommended action is: 'Strengthening defence and security cooperation, including in maritime security, building on our overseas military bases and existing contribution in the Indo-Pacific, enhancing our engagement and exercising with our FPDA [Five Power Defence Arrangements] partners, and increasing our engagement with regional security groupings' (HMG, 2021, p. 67). While AUKUS might have arisen out of a specific situation involving Australia, British participation fits in well with this recommended approach. Specifically on China, the report refers to the need to '[improve] our ability to respond to the systemic challenge that it poses to our security, prosperity and values – and those of our allies and partners' (HMG, 2021, p. 22). One can see the relevance of the assumptions underlying AUKUS.

Reminiscent of President Obama's 'pivot' to the Asia-Pacific in 2011 (United States, The White House, 2011), one factor in the British 'tilt' might have been a post-Brexit

need to strengthen the relationship with the US. As far as the relationship with Australia is concerned, the stronger emphasis on China as a security issue paralleled Australia's shift in the same direction from about 2017, suggesting some 're-convergence' between British and Australian interests in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific (Hall, 2022).

Of course, apart from AUKUS, the UK was already present in this wider region, with its significant trade relationship with China, a strengthening of the relationship with India, periodic naval visits, a naval presence in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf through Operation Kipion (focused on maritime security in the Gulf, especially mine-hunting), the FPDA (with Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand), a small contingent of troops in Brunei, a small military presence in Oman, and the British Indian Ocean Territory (important to the US because of its base on Diego Garcia). As well as the major powers of China, India and Japan, the integrated defence review highlights the importance to the UK of relations with South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines: British engagement with ASEAN also receives special mention (HMG, 2021, p. 22).[7]

Apart from the strategic aspect one can see the benefits for British defence industry in the plan for AUKUS submarines as set out in the announcement of 13–14 March 2023 ('British-led design chosen for AUKUS submarine project', 2023). Australia would financially assist in the development of AUKUS submarines at the Barrow shipyard, including the creation of thousands of new jobs. Using a British design, the UK would increase the size of its submarine fleet to potentially nineteen (Allegretti, 2021), roughly a doubling. The unit cost would be less with the building of more rather than fewer submarines. Britain expected to have its first AUKUS submarines by the late 2030s, ahead of Australia.

Asian Commonwealth

While clearly Australia and the United Kingdom are central to AUKUS, the new partnership has implications for a number of other Commonwealth countries in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific. In South Asia, there has been some response from India. In Southeast Asia, Malaysia has been vocal, whereas Singapore has been quieter; there are also implications for Brunei.

India

While the official Indian response to AUKUS has been muted, implicitly India gains from effective strategies that constrain China. India participates in the Quad, a grouping that complements AUKUS as a form of 'soft balancing' vis-à-vis China. At the same time, India pursues the goal of 'strategic autonomy', following a strategy of 'multi-alignment'. India cooperates with China on some issues and is a fellow member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); its policy towards the Ukraine war has been cautious, taking care not to criticise Russia, a major arms supplier to India (Verma, 2023; Warren & Sumit Ganguly, 2022).

There has been some suggestion that India has concerns about AUKUS undermining the Quad (Singh, 2021). AUKUS injects an element of 'hard' balancing against China, whereas the emphasis with the Quad is 'soft' balancing. India might see benefits in

constraining China but does not favour unduly provocative behaviour. France's fallout with the AUKUS partners in 2021 meant that France focused more strongly on India in the Indo-Pacific but in the longer term India preferred cooperative arrangements with both France and the AUKUS countries.

There also appeared to be some Indian dissatisfaction with AUKUS on the grounds that the US was favouring Australia among the Quad countries (by making US nuclear propulsion technology available), implicitly sidelining India in that respect. An increase in AUKUS submarine patrols in the Indian Ocean would have implications for India as an Indian Ocean power; China might also increase its submarine deployments in this region (Singh, 2021).

This pointed to another aspect of the Indian response to AUKUS: the concern to strengthen its own submarine fleet. At the end of 2022, India had fifteen conventionally powered attack submarines (including four *Kalvari*-class, based on the French *Scorpène* submarine) and only one nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed submarine (*Arihant*) (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023, p. 249). Given a perception that India's nuclear forces (land-based and air-launched, as well as naval) were insufficient to deter China, there was an argument that India could use its relationships with both France and the US to assist in developing nuclear-armed and nuclear-powered submarines to overcome this deficit (Jaybhay, 2023). Given the long-term nature of such programmes, India could coordinate with France and the US to fill the gap in the short and medium term (as Australia was doing with the US and the UK through AUKUS).

Southeast Asia

Among the Southeast Asian Commonwealth countries (and indeed among Southeast Asian countries generally), Malaysia has been most critical of AUKUS; Indonesia (a non-Commonwealth country) has had a similar position but more low profile.[8]

In response to the AUKUS announcement of 13 March 2023 Malaysia reiterated the critical position it had adopted in September 2021. At the same time, Malaysia appreciated the willingness of the AUKUS countries to engage with Malaysia over the issue and acknowledged that two of those countries were partners in the FPDA. According to the official statement, Malaysia expected the AUKUS parties and other countries to respect Malaysian waters according to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty and the ASEAN Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN). More generally, Malaysia emphasised 'the importance of promoting transparency and confidence-building among all countries', and the need to avoid 'any provocation that could potentially trigger an arms race or affect peace and security in the region' (Malaysia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). The diplomatic tone of the Malaysian statement might have been a 'reward' for assiduous Australian diplomacy, with a report of '60 calls in March [2023] to leaders in Southeast Asia and the Pacific to discuss the agreement' (Storey & Choong, 2023, p. 6).

Singapore has mostly adopted a low profile in response to AUKUS. The island state is not officially a US ally but works closely with the US while also engaging with China. The US has naval and air support facilities in Singapore. Among the AUKUS partners, Singapore conducts military training in Australia and the US (as well as in Brunei,

France, Taiwan and Thailand) (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023, pp. -288–289). Both the UK and Australia are FPDA partners with Singapore, meaning a high level of cooperation, some joint exercises and periodic military visits. Given that Singapore favours engagement by a range of powers in Southeast Asia as a means of their balancing each other and creating space for small and middle powers, the attitude towards AUKUS has been positive. In a visit to Canberra on 1 May 2023, Vivian Balakrishnan, Singapore's foreign minister, spoke of the need to avoid Southeast Asia becoming 'an arena for proxy wars'. He welcomed AUKUS 'insofar as it contributes to regional security'. Singapore had 'long-term relationships' with all three AUKUS partners and was 'comfortable' with all of them. Balakrishnan said Australia's nuclear-powered submarines would be 'welcome to visit' Singapore (Hurst, 2023b).

In the case of tiny Brunei there have been British forces stationed in the sultanate since independence in 1984. At the end of 2022, there was one British infantry battalion stationed in Brunei, amounting to 2000 military personnel (Gurkhas) (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023, p. 235) While these forces have a specific role in enhancing Brunei's security, their presence long precedes aspirations to 'global Britain' and a more significant British role in the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific.

Pacific Commonwealth

With the Pacific Commonwealth, the country most affected by AUKUS has been New Zealand. Among the independent Pacific island countries (PICs), there are nine Commonwealth members: Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Both New Zealand and the PICs (varying to some extent) have strong anti-nuclear positions, embodied most obviously in the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (SPNFZ) as agreed to in the Treaty of Rarotonga in 1985 (also including Australia).

AUKUS complicates New Zealand's relationship with Australia. There is close defence cooperation between the two countries. Ever since the rupture with the US over New Zealand's ban on nuclear ship visits (both nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed) in 1985 (Lange, 1990; Macmillan, 1987; Pugh, 1989), New Zealand has become more dependent on Australia for defence matters (there is cooperation with the US but not as allies). AUKUS means that Australian nuclear-powered submarines could not visit New Zealand ports or patrol in New Zealand waters (McClure, 2021). More generally AUKUS highlights the divergence between Australia and New Zealand in their international orientations. Australia is far more integrated with the US, whereas New Zealand emphasises its South Pacific location. Both countries are engaged with Asia-Pacific issues, but Australia gives more attention to the security dimension of these issues.

In her initial response to AUKUS, prime minister Jacinda Ardern (Labour) said that New Zealand 'welcome(s) the increased engagement of the UK and US in the region' but the ban on nuclear-powered vessels in New Zealand waters 'remains unchanged' (Ensor, 2021). Judith Collins, the leader of the opposition National Party at the time, argued that New Zealand should have sought association with AUKUS. However, Gerry Brownlee (foreign affairs spokesman for the Nationals) struck a more sceptical note when he spoke in March 2023 of AUKUS as a sign of increasing international polarisation, also expressing concerns about the implications for interoperability between the defence forces of

Australia and New Zealand and for cooperation between the two countries in the Pacific islands (given anti-nuclear sentiment in that region) (McKay, 2023).

Aside from the issue of nuclear-powered submarines, it might be possible for New Zealand to cooperate with AUKUS in the development of non-nuclear advanced defence technologies. In March 2003, Andrew Little (New Zealand defence minister) confirmed that there were discussions being held on this matter, referring in particular to surveillance technologies (Staff & agencies, 2023).

Among the PICs, the only government to welcome AUKUS explicitly was that of the Federated States of Micronesia, a non-Commonwealth member closely linked to the US. While Tonga and Nauru appeared quiet, all other Commonwealth PICs expressed reservations or outright criticisms, focusing on concerns about increased militarisation and polarisation in the region, the need to prioritise climate action and anti-nuclear attitudes (Brennan, 2023; Middleby et al., 2021).

In the case of Fiji there was some shift in emphasis after the general elections of December 2022. Frank Bainimarama as the previous prime minister was critical of AUKUS, whereas new prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka was supportive. Rabuka indicated his support for AUKUS when Albanese stopped in Fiji on his way back from the San Diego meeting with Biden and Sunak in March 2023 (Crowe, 2023). Rabuka was more critical of China and more pro-Western than his predecessor.

On the issue of SPNFZ, Australia had been active during negotiation of the Treaty of Rarotonga to ensure that there were no significant constraints on US activities in the South Pacific; French nuclear testing was the main target (occurring in French Polynesia from the 1960s and not concluding until 1996). Examining the treaty from the perspective of AUKUS, one could argue that expanding the role of nuclear-powered submarines is contrary to the 'spirit' of the treaty, but such vessels are not specifically barred. Article 5 prohibits the 'stationing' of any explosive nuclear device within the territory of a signatory to the treaty. However, 'visits' by foreign ships and aircraft are allowed on the basis of a party to the treaty exercising its sovereign rights (Article 6). Visits to Australian ports by American or British submarines that might be nuclear-armed are thus permissible. The treaty recognises the principle of 'freedom of the seas' according to international law (Article 2), thus allowing transit of SPNFZ by nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed submarines (Australian Treaty Series, 1986).

Prospects for AUKUS

While clearly AUKUS is a new development, we can ask whether this partnership is likely to endure. There are at least two aspects to consider: the submarine programme and the strategic impact.

With reference to the submarine programme, the most relevant factor to consider is the political situation in each of the three AUKUS countries. With a production schedule extending to the 2050s, there are many potential obstacles. One of these relates to possible political changes within each of the AUKUS countries. In Australia, both the Coalition and Labor parties have backed AUKUS, with some dissenting voices on the Labor side. At this point, it is difficult to see the critics gaining much political traction. In the UK, the Labour opposition has backed AUKUS but with

some critics on the left. A Labour government under Keir Starmer is likely to continue support for AUKUS. Since Australia is effectively subsidising submarine construction at Barrow, the argument that the UK cannot afford the huge expense of expanding its fleet of nuclear-powered submarines is undermined to some extent.[9] However, there is still the argument that even with the Australian subsidy what the UK is attempting is too ambitious in the constrained post-Brexit economic circumstances.

From the perspective of Australian defence industry, there are questions concerning the development of the capacity required to build nuclear-powered submarines in Adelaide. Prime minister Albanese has compared the project to the development of a car industry in Australia in the post-war period (Albanese, 2023). Australia currently lacks the personnel and technical capacity to undertake projects in this area, having eschewed the use of nuclear power and the development of civilian nuclear industry in the past. There is also a massive challenge for the Royal Australian Navy to recruit and train personnel who can operate the nuclear-powered submarines.

From a political perspective, a major difficulty is anticipating the unfolding of US politics, given the continuing strength of Donald Trump and Trumpism. With the 'America first' mindset there might be an argument that the US (again allowing for the Australian subsidy of US shipyards) is being too generous to its AUKUS allies. This could lead to the modification or even abandonment of the AUKUS project.

On the question of the strategic impact of AUKUS, the key question is whether this partnership will constrain China significantly. Here, we should say that cooperation among the AUKUS countries and associated partners and allies is likely to endure irrespective of AUKUS itself continuing. AUKUS could remain even if the submarine plan were significantly modified, focusing on its role as a cooperative arrangement for developing advanced defence technology.

Whether or not AUKUS remains strong as a grouping, it needs to be set alongside the other factors in the region that contribute to China's balancing. Most significant here would be the strength of other powers that might concurrently engage with but also limit China. This includes not just the US and other major powers such as Japan and India, but significant regional powers such as Australia, Indonesia and South Korea; the position of all powers, whether large, middle or small, needs to be assessed. Extra-regional powers such as the UK, France and the European Union can be relevant. Geopolitics in the region is more than China versus the US. The range of groupings in which the countries of the region participate is relevant. The Commonwealth is not particularly important in this context, but CHOGM would be one context where a range of regional leaders can interact on Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific security issues if they so wished.

A final point to note is the suggestion that other countries might join AUKUS. Among Commonwealth countries Canada has shown some interest, particularly in relation to participating in the development of advanced defence technologies (Cecco, 2023); as mentioned previously, the same applies to New Zealand. Both Canada and New Zealand connect to the AUKUS countries through the Five Eyes arrangement for intelligence collection and sharing. India is unlikely to become an AUKUS partner but is open to ways of acquiring nuclear-powered submarines. Japan and South Korea (both non-

Commonwealth countries but US allies in Northeast Asia) are possible candidates for association with AUKUS.

Notes

1. On the British role in brokering the AUKUS deal, see Landler (2021).
2. For well formulated critical responses to AUKUS, see also White (2023) and Thakur (2023).
3. The conference upheld a pro-AUKUS position but with significant minority opposition. This paragraph was written before the conference.
4. Details in this paragraph are from 'Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS' (2023) and 'Great AUKUS' (2023). During the latter part of 2023 reservations in the US Congress about the negative impact of AUKUS on the US's own submarine fleet indicated a significant obstacle for the project. It was not clear by November 2023 whether there would be major modifications to AUKUS. See Kuperman (2023).
5. In addition, the United Kingdom has one *Trafalgar* submarine and four nuclear-armed *Vanguard* submarines (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023, p. 147). The total number of nuclear-powered submarines is ten.
6. One estimate is that the submarine plan will mean an increase of up to 0.5% of GDP per year on top of a defence budget in 2023 of 2.11% of GDP (Ryan, 2023).
7. See also Wintour (2021).
8. However, note the statement by President Joko Widodo in May 2023 that he viewed AUKUS and the Quad as 'partners, not competitors'; this was not necessarily the view of the Indonesian government. See Connors (2023).
9. However, note Malcolm Turnbull's argument the submarine plan announced in March 2023 was unsustainable given the 'sick' British economy. Turnbull preferred a modification of the plan agreed with France in April 2016, with Australia opting instead for French-designed nuclear-powered submarines. Turnbull saw AUKUS as diminishing Australian sovereignty. See Knott (2023).

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