

An Open Letter to the Australian Government from Concerned Scholars Regarding the AUKUS Agreement

We the undersigned are scholars of the humanities and social sciences and other disciplines with expertise in the following issues. We write this open letter to express our concerns regarding the Australia, United Kingdom, United States (AUKUS) trilateral security agreement. Specifically, our concerns relate to pillar one of the agreement, the joint development with the US and the UK of a nuclear-powered submarine (SSN) capability for Australia.

The underlying strategic rationale behind the AUKUS decision has not been adequately explained to the Australian public. Even if it is argued that the SSNs may provide certain capability advantages, the government has not made clear how AUKUS will translate into a safer Australia.

AUKUS will come at a huge financial cost and with great uncertainty of its success. It is likely to compound Australia's strategic risks, heighten geopolitical tensions, and undermine efforts at nuclear non-proliferation. It puts Australia at odds with our closest neighbours in the region, distracts us from addressing climate change, and risks increasing the threat of nuclear war. Australia's defence autonomy will only be further eroded because of AUKUS. All of this will be done to support the primacy of an ally whose position in Asia is more fragile than commonly assumed, and whose domestic politics is increasingly unstable.

There is no question that a submarine capability is critical for Australia's defence, particularly for undertaking surveillance and protecting our maritime approaches. The central and critical question, however, is does defending Australia require the offensive long-range power-projection capabilities provided by SSNs?

The answer provided by Defence, and successive Australian governments, has until recently been consistently in the negative. The procurement of French-designed diesel-electric powered submarines, initially sought to replace the ageing Collins-class boats, would be, it was promised, 'regionally superior'. Now, we are told, it is only the superior attributes of SSNs that fulfil Australia's defence requirements.

Perhaps this is the case. But Australia should not proceed based solely on these publicly untested assumptions. Peter Varghese, former head of the Office of National Assessments and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, makes the salient point that AUKUS is too momentous a decision to be left to the 'echo chamber' of classified discussions. It demands a yet to be had 'proper and forensic public discussion about other options and their underlying rationale'.

SSNs, it has been proclaimed, are superior vessels when compared to conventionally-powered submarines in terms of stealth, speed, manoeuvrability, endurance, and survivability. This is correct in some respects, but only to an extent, and with important qualifications. Many of the apparent advantages of SSNs are conditional on the specific operational environment, and technological developments may render them less stealthy and effective than defence officials assume.

More importantly, possible superior capabilities alone do not translate into direct defence benefits, and many of the claims made in favour of SSNs enhancing Australia's security do not survive scrutiny. For example, it's been argued that the superior speed and endurance of SSNs provides advantages for protecting Australia's vital shipping routes. However, the volume of our seaborne trade is much too large to patrol effectively, and that which passes through the South China Sea goes mainly to China.

Similarly, the argument that SSNs are required to protect Australia's undersea communications infrastructure is overstated. Spread across a large geographic area, undersea cables are difficult to protect militarily, vulnerable to attack not only by submarines but also by relatively unsophisticated and cheap underwater technologies.

Significantly, there has been no compelling strategic argument made for why a small number of expensive nuclear-powered submarines confers greater defence advantages rather than a much larger number of cheaper conventionally powered ones.

Whatever the tally of defence benefits that SSNs might offer Australia, they must be carefully weighed against the costs and risks.

With an official estimate of up to \$368 billion, almost certain to rise to even greater heights, AUKUS constitutes the most expensive defence procurement in Australian history by a wide margin. Equally importantly, the significant and ongoing opportunity costs and trade-offs this presents for defence and broader social spending are not easily dismissed.

Constructing SSNs will be one of the biggest engineering feats Australia has ever undertaken. There are immense execution risks involved in this effort to build, operate, maintain, and crew eight SSNs, and two types of boat simultaneously – the existing American Virginia-class and the yet to be designed AUKUS-class – with no experience in the management of nuclear-propulsion technology.

The political uncertainty inherent across all three nations, over a period of 10 terms of the Australian government, also raises the risk profile. It seems imprudent to hitch Australia's most expensive and lethal defence capability to an increasingly uncertain ally that is in relative decline, politically unstable, and exhibiting troubling signs of sliding into an illiberal democracy.

Australia's future nuclear naval reactors, fuelled by weapons-grade uranium, will not be subject to routine International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards on the grounds of protecting sensitive American military information. Although Australia is in negotiations with the IAEA to develop alternative safeguards, this establishes a troubling precedent for other non-nuclear armed states to exploit, and risks undermining international controls to prevent nuclear proliferation.

Australia's degree of dependence on the United States to safely operate the SSNs is likely to be high and risks the possibility of a US veto over their operation. It may not be wholly unusual for Australia to have limited operational sovereignty of its defence assets, but as former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull has remarked, AUKUS takes this dependency to new heights. The pressure to submit this capability to American strategic interests will be almost impossible to resist.

Still, the most significant risks are strategic. The tripartite enterprise risks incorporating Australia into the more offensive-oriented aspects of our American ally's military strategy in East Asia, most worryingly with respect to nuclear warfare. AUKUS will equip Australia with a potent capability to strike Chinese naval forces close to their home ports and, in coalition with the US, play a frontline role in hunting China's nuclear-armed submarine force and its second-strike nuclear deterrent capability. 'For this reason alone', warns the Australia Institute's International and Security Affairs head, Allan Behm, 'China will view Australia's decision as a wilful contribution to an existential nuclear threat to China'.

Many of our closest neighbours in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific have expressed concerns that the agreement will heighten geopolitical tensions, contribute to a regional arms race, and undermine nuclear non-proliferation. Such criticism reflects that AUKUS is at odds with regional desires to achieve a peaceful and balanced strategic order, and with the deep antinuclear sentiment that is an especially central element of Pacific regionalism.

Pacific island states have made clear that their primary and immediate security concern is climate change, and expressed the view that AUKUS indicates a lack of serious commitment from Australia in helping them to deal with that risk. Pacific voices should remind us that we too are facing a first-order strategic threat from climate change, and AUKUS serves as a distraction from addressing that critical threat to our security.

Put simply, the public case for AUKUS has yet to be made with any degree of rigour or reliability. The government must justify how the agreement will make Australia safer and at an acceptable cost. We the undersigned call on the government not to proceed with pillar one of AUKUS until and unless the questions and issues raised in this letter are adequately explained and addressed.

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