

30 May 2025

Secretary  
Defence Committee  
United Kingdom House of Commons  
LONDON UK  
Vide email [defcom@parliament.uk](mailto:defcom@parliament.uk)

**AUKUS Inquiry**

Dear Secretary,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our views to the House of Commons Defence Committee inquiry into AUKUS.

I am pleased to provide the attached submission on behalf of the Australian Peace and Security Forum.

We shall be pleased to answer any question that the Committee may have.

We wish the Committee well in its deliberations.

We request acknowledgement of receipt of our submission.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Michael G Smith', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Michael G Smith AO  
Major General (Ret'd)  
Public Officer  
Australian Peace and Security Forum  
E: [michaelgsmith38@gmail.com](mailto:michaelgsmith38@gmail.com)  
T: +61 (0)439 490 297  
W: [austpeaceandsecurityforum.org.au](http://austpeaceandsecurityforum.org.au)

Submission to the Inquiry by the UK Parliament House of Commons Defence  
Committee into AUKUS  
An Australian Perspective

## Introduction

The Australian Peace and Security Forum (APSF) is pleased to provide this submission on AUKUS for consideration of the UK Defence Committee.<sup>1</sup>

An Australian perspective on AUKUS is relevant to the deliberations of the UK Defence Committee, not least because Australia is the ultimate recipient of the proposed AUKUS submarine capability. It is important that the UK understands the extent of indifference and increasing opposition to AUKUS in Australia.

From a UK perspective it is essential to consider the geopolitical priority and consequences of the UK committing considerable resources to Australia and the Indo-Pacific region. To what extent should the UK devote scarce resources and become engaged in military operations to contain China in the Indo-Pacific? Is it in the UK's best interest to be drawn into US military operations and potentially conflict in the Indo-Pacific? It is also important for the UK to realistically assess the risks to and priorities of the UK's defence industry, already under considerable stress. At a time of heightened defence expenditure and preparation in the UK, what are the opportunity costs for the UK's commitment to AUKUS?

From an Australian perspective, APSF contends that AUKUS jeopardises Australia's peace and security, fails to position Australia to optimally meet the changed and changing geopolitical realities in the Indo-Pacific, degrades Australia's sovereignty and independence of action, and severely unbalances the operational capability of the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

AUKUS was conceived in secret without parliamentary and/or public disclosure or consultation in Australia. At an estimated cost of AU\$368 billion over a 30-40 year timeframe, AUKUS is by far Australia's most expensive defence acquisition with an extremely high risk of failure and incurring significant opportunity costs.

This submission addresses the key questions stated in the Inquiry's terms of reference that are most relevant to Australia and which impact on the deliberations of the UK Defence Committee.

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<sup>1</sup> The APSF is an Australian not-for-profit think tank bringing together a broad network of informed researchers and professionals working to strengthen peace and security for all Australians by providing information, analysis and opportunities for dialogue with Government and civil society. More information is at [austpeaceandsecurityforum.org.au](http://austpeaceandsecurityforum.org.au).

## Geopolitical Changes and AUKUS Assumptions

Since the announcement of the AUKUS partnership in 2021 the geopolitical landscape has evolved, further impacting the foundational assumptions on which AUKUS was based. The first and most important assumption concerns China. China is now the major power in Asia, as well as an established major global power. This geopolitical reality highlights the urgent need for Australia to carefully manage its critical relationship with China - its major trading partner. This relationship is central to the future prosperity and wellbeing of the Australian people and its regional neighbours, and different from the geopolitical impact to the other AUKUS partners, the US and the UK. The 'geography' in 'geopolitical' is critically important to Australia's future security, and very different from that of the US and the UK. The growing contest for primacy in the Indo-Pacific between the US and China places Australia with a difficult conundrum, different from its other two AUKUS partners: viz. how to manage its defence alliance with the US while simultaneously managing its economic relationship with China?

The primary justification for AUKUS was to counter and contain China by further cementing Australia's defence alliance with the US by aligning the ADF's force structure evermore deeper into the US order of battle. However, together with increased basing of US forces and US military infrastructure in Australia under the Force Posture Initiatives, this containment strategy heightens regional tension and makes Australia less secure. It is clearly not in Australia's or the UK's national interest to become involved in conflict with China, even unintentionally, and particularly over Taiwan which Australia (and the UK) does not recognise, and/or over disputes in the South China Sea which have long been contested by China, Taiwan and their regional neighbours. Conflict with China is the least favourable outcome for Australia's future peace and security and we would suggest for the UK as well. Such conflict must be avoided at all costs and only be contemplated by Australia if its sovereignty or vital interests were directly threatened. As was the case in World War 2, the UK will rightly give defence priority to Europe and the northern hemisphere. The UK's defence of the Far East failed in World War 2 and has continued to decline. Australia should not rely on the UK to honour a commitment to AUKUS, and the UK should not make commitments that it cannot guarantee and which could drag it into unnecessary military operations against China.

A critical issue for the Defence Committee's consideration is whether or not AUKUS commits the UK to an agreement that is fundamentally driven by a US policy of containment of China in the Indo-Pacific. AUKUS is not about defence of the UK. The Australian Government is coming under considerable pressure to rethink AUKUS. The UK could be left holding a corner of an expensive project that will add to the UK's military challenges rather than enhancing security for the UK.

AUKUS heightens the likelihood of conflict with China and the likelihood of UK submarines being involved. If deterrence fails (as it has so often when arms races occur), conflict escalates. This would most likely result in serious collateral damage to Australian citizens and infrastructure. Should either a conventional or nuclear conflict between the US and China eventuate, Australia would almost certainly be targeted because of AUKUS and its hosting of US military bases. More so than its AUKUS

partners, but like other countries in the Indo-Pacific, Australia must learn to live with China. Australia's prime responsibility is to convince the US to have a measured approach and to avoid war with China. This should be achievable because unlike other major powers China has never been a hegemonic power and does not have military bases globally. Priority for Australia's defence security, therefore, does not rest with AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines that contribute to and even promote a contest with China: rather it rests in having a non-threatening posture, a modern and highly balanced ADF, backed by achievable national mobilisation and resilience capabilities and plans. The implication of this line of argument is that Australia may reconsider the AUKUS agreement in the light of changing and uncertain geopolitical priorities.

Australia's national security will be strengthened far more by adopting a non-assertive policy to other nations, partnering with regional neighbours to maintain the southwest Pacific as a non-nuclear zone of peace, collaborating in military endeavours to deal with climate disruption in the Indo-Pacific, and by demonstrating our commitment to the UN rules-based international order, including peacekeeping, peacebuilding and conflict prevention. The exorbitant cost of AUKUS denies Australia the opportunity to prioritise these opportunities to enhance its national security and therefore leaves Australia seeking support for its security from the UK.

Geopolitical circumstances have also changed since the re-election of US President Donald Trump. The US is no longer a reliable ally, as demonstrated by its uncertain commitment to NATO and to other countries. Although the US remains by far the predominant military power in the world, it has not demonstrated a credible track record of success in its many interventions and conflicts. Successive US war games have consistently shown that the US and its allies are most unlikely to be able to defeat China should hostilities occur in China's region. Today, China has three aircraft carriers along the western Pacific coast, with more to come. China also possesses Dongfeng-31AG intercontinental ballistic missiles with a range of 12,000 kilometres, sixth-generation aircraft and more than 70% of the world's drone production capacity. The US and its allies have no realistic possibility of defeating China (short of mutually assured nuclear annihilation).

The re-election of President Trump requires Australia and the UK to recalibrate their alliances with the US. It is no longer valid (if it ever was) for either government to assert that their national interests are fully aligned with the US. There is growing pressure from the Australian electorate for this 'recalibration', of which AUKUS is an important component because the alliance further embeds Australia into the US order of battle and restricts Australia's freedom of action. There can be no doubt that all AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines will operate under US command and control.

From a UK perspective, changing geopolitical circumstances caused by Brexit, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, continuing conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, and uncertainty as to the US's commitment to NATO, further prioritise the UK's need to focus on Europe and the northern hemisphere. Geography trumps cultural and historic preferences. Even if the UK was to prove capable of constructing its component of the AUKUS fleet of eight submarines on time and on budget – a highly contestable

proposition – it does not make strategic sense for the UK to deploy an Astute-class submarine to the Antipodes.

Given these geopolitical circumstances, the exorbitant budgeted and opportunity costs of AUKUS, and the extreme risk of AUKUS ever being accomplished and being operationally sustainable, the Australian Government is facing increasing pressure to undertake a proper review with full parliamentary and community consultation. The initial public concern of AUKUS has continued to gain momentum, with criticism transcending the secretive process by which the decision was originally taken. Despite these growing concerns, both major political entities – the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal/National Coalition – currently remain committed to AUKUS. However, a growing number of organisations and parliamentarians, strategic analysts and commentators, former prime ministers and senior ministers from across the political divide, as well as former defence force members, continue to raise legitimate concerns. It is sensible, therefore, for the UK Defence Committee to understand the high degree of scepticism and opposition to AUKUS that exists, and is growing, in the Australian community.

## AUKUS Pillar 1

### Timeline and Objectives

Pillar 1 aims to deliver advanced capabilities within the timelines set out in the 2023 joint Leaders' Statement on AUKUS. While progress is being made, a number of critical challenges must be addressed to achieve success. Unmistakably, this is an extremely high-risk and high-cost project. Key challenges include:

- **Industrial Capacity:** enhancing AUKUS production capabilities within partner nations will be crucial to success. Investment in cutting-edge technologies and streamlined processes will be necessary to meet the ambitious goals. This is a high-risk strategy, with both the US and UK submarine-building capacity well behind schedule, while Australian industrial capacity is still at a rudimentary level. For Australia to succeed it would require a truly national effort that is most unlikely to be met and supported by all States and Territories. As well as the technological leap required, Australia would need to attract significant and scarce human resources from the US and the UK at a time when these countries are under stress to meet their own targets.
- **Recruitment and Retention:** attracting and retaining qualified personnel will be vital for AUKUS to succeed. Strengthening security vetting procedures and offering competitive incentives can help build a dedicated workforce, but crewing AUKUS submarines and retaining the necessary numbers will present an enormous challenge for the Royal Australian Navy, as previously evidenced from the difficulties in crewing the smaller Collins-class diesel submarines. Advice from highly experienced Australian submariners contends that not only will numbers be extremely difficult to recruit and sustain, but that success will be further jeopardised by the training required to crew the three different variants of AUKUS

submarines that are currently planned to comprise the fleet. This will almost certainly result in Australia trying to recruit skilled and experienced submariners and maintenance technicians from the UK submarine program, undermining UK capacity.

- **Infrastructure Development:** infrastructure to support new submarine operations will be essential, requiring strategic planning and investment to ensure that facilities are equipped to handle advanced defence systems. Australia will require massive infrastructure development far beyond anything it has previously achieved. Success will require a total national effort, unlikely to be enthusiastically supported by all States and Territories, particularly at the expense of redeveloping more viable manufacturing industries and responding to the real impacts of climate change. Public concern over the cost and risk of AUKUS has already caused a loss of social licence within Australia. As this increases the Australian Government is unlikely to be able to continue making large grants to the UK submarine program. This risk is particularly relevant to the deliberations of the Defence Committee in its AUKUS Inquiry.
- **Storage and disposal of nuclear waste:** nuclear waste is highly dangerous and persists indefinitely, impacting on future generations. Unless and until a viable solution is found and agreed by the communities most impacted, AUKUS should not proceed. Insufficient attention has been given to this critical issue. Australian civil society is unlikely to accept verbal assurances that storage and disposal will be safely conducted on “Defence/Commonwealth land”, particularly in the aftermath of UK nuclear testing in Australia last century and the consequent impact on Indigenous communities.
- **Planned obsolescence:** AUKUS is a long-term investment in planned obsolescence. Both the US and UK have huge difficulties in meeting their own submarine delivery schedules, placing AUKUS in doubt and almost certainly behind schedule and over budget. By the time the full fleet is acquired we will be living in different geopolitical circumstances, and technology will have advanced remarkably. The ocean depths will no longer be opaque and large attack submarines will become detectable and have lost their stealth. Greater emphasis will be on smaller and cheaper robotic vessels that are far more relevant in defending Australia’s maritime approaches. To better assure its security Australia needs to be at the forefront of this technology which is non-aggressive to other countries but demonstrably convincing in countering any adversary that might contemplate attacking Australia. It is a legitimate and defensive strategy far superior to the uncertainties of AUKUS.

#### UK Astute-class Submarine Rotation

The UK’s commitment to rotate an Astute-class submarine out of Australia from 2027 holds significant implications for both the UK and Australia. Although benefits include enhanced interoperability and shared knowledge, mutual strategic priorities do not align and significant risks involve logistical challenges and resource allocation. The UK

needs to consider the consequences of retaining a submarine at sea for long deployments in the Indo-Pacific as part of the China containment policy, and whether this is in the best interest of the UK. Australia would need to accept the likelihood of the UK withdrawing to meet higher UK defence priorities in the northern hemisphere.

## AUKUS Pillar 2

Pillar 2 of AUKUS was largely an afterthought to help justify Pillar 1. Accordingly, Pillar 2 should not be a determining factor in proceeding with AUKUS – the tail should never wag the dog. Pillar 2 calls for the collaborative development of advanced technologies across six specific areas, all of which could be pursued separately from the AUKUS umbrella. Nor is it sensible to unnecessarily restrict technological development to these three partner countries, thereby demonstrating elitism and denying opportunities to benefit from broader international technological engagement. Clarifying the scope, funding, and objectives of Pillar 2 is essential for success, requiring transparent communication and defined goals to ensure all stakeholders are aligned and able to contribute effectively. It is most unlikely that AUKUS partners will have the same technological priorities.

Pillar 2 is largely about optimising artificial intelligence (AI) and lethal autonomous weapons in modern warfare. In these areas technology is way ahead of policy, and the AUKUS partners are yet to agree common legal standards. Consequently, the full scope of AI collaboration for AUKUS is unclear. Australia and the UK have a responsibility to ensure robust policy is in place to guide development of weapons systems that accord with international law. To date, Australia has been slow to adopt and shape this important agenda, particularly within the ‘Group of Governmental Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems’ in the UN’s important Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW).

## Conclusion

The UK Defence Committee’s inquiry into AUKUS is both timely and warranted. Geopolitical circumstances have changed for both the UK and Australia since AUKUS was conceived in 2021. Strategic priorities for both countries do not align. The UK should not proceed with AUKUS if it cannot guarantee delivery of its commitments on time and on budget, and certainly not proceed if AUKUS relegates higher defence priorities for the UK. Opposition to AUKUS is growing in Australia with the realisation that US and Australian vital interests no longer align and require recalibration. The priorities for Australia are to have fit-for-purpose and affordable national security and national defence strategies and to avoid unnecessary conflict with China.

The APSF is most grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to this important Inquiry.

Canberra, Australia  
30 May 2025