

## FEATURE

# AUKUS

Wikipedia

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**AUKUS** is a trilateral [security pact](#) between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, announced on 15 September 2021 for the [Indo-Pacific](#) region.

Under the pact, the US and the UK will help Australia to acquire [nuclear-powered submarines](#).

Although the joint announcement by Australian prime minister [Scott Morrison](#), British prime minister [Boris Johnson](#) and US president [Joe Biden](#) did not mention any other country by name, anonymous White House sources have alleged it is designed to counter the influence of China in the Indo-Pacific region. However,

Johnson later told parliament that the move was not intended to be adversarial toward China.

The pact also includes cooperation on [cyber capabilities](#), [artificial intelligence](#), quantum technologies and undersea capabilities. Under the pact, Australia will acquire new long-range strike capabilities for its air force and navy. The pact will focus on military capability, separating it from the [Five Eyes](#) intelligence-sharing alliance that also includes New Zealand and Canada.

On 17 September 2021, France, which is an ally of the three countries, recalled its ambassadors from Australia and the US; French foreign minister [Jean-Yves Le Drian](#) called the pact a "stab in the back" following Australia's

cancellation of a [French–Australian submarine deal](#) worth €56 billion (A\$90 billion) without notice, ending efforts to develop a deeper strategic partnership between France and Australia.

## Background

### Naval Group-Australia strategic partnership agreement

*Further information:* [Attack-class submarine](#)

In 2009, two years after the start of the project to replace the [Royal Australian Navy's conventionally powered Collins-class](#) submarines, the Australian Defence White Paper stated: "The Government has ruled out nuclear propulsion for these submarines", hence removing the French nuclear-powered [Suffren-class](#) submarine from contention.

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In February 2021, an initial design plan was rejected as being too expensive, and Naval Group were given until September to improve their proposal. At a [Senate](#) inquiry in early June 2021, with delays ongoing, Defence Secretary [Greg Moriarty](#) revealed under questioning that he had considered making contingency plans if the French project was to fail, admitting that there had been ongoing problems for over a year. Two weeks later, Australian prime minister [Scott Morrison](#) met French president [Emmanuel Macron](#) in Paris and expressed concern about the project going off track, to which Macron replied that France was giving "full and complete" commitment and would proceed "further and faster if possible".

In August 2021, the French and Australian defense and foreign affairs ministers released a joint statement reaffirming the project, stating that the "Ministers underlined the importance of the Future Submarine program."

Australia decided to cancel the contract with Naval Group for the Attack-class submarines,[14] despite having already spent about \$2.4 billion on the French project.[21] It

was expected that Australia would have to pay hundreds of millions of Euros in penalties for cancelling the contract.

It was later revealed that on the very day the project was cancelled, the Australians had written a letter to France, stating that "they were satisfied with the submarine's achievable performance and with the progress of the program."

### Australia-UK-US negotiations

[The Telegraph](#) reported that in March 2021 the Australian navy chief [Vice Admiral Michael Noonan](#) met in London with his British counterpart [Admiral Tony Radakin](#) and requested assistance from the UK and the US in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines. The newspaper reported that British Foreign Secretary [Dominic Raab](#) "helped broker the deal". [The New York Times](#) too reported that Australia first approached the UK for assistance, and that it was discussed by Johnson and Biden at the [June 2021 G7 summit](#) held in Cornwall, England [The Guardian](#) reported that there was a trilateral discussion between Johnson, Biden and Morrison at the G7 summit, with The Telegraph adding that it was discussed at the G7 unbeknown to Macron.

This approach was possible as a result of the UK not entering into a formal foreign policy and security treaty in the [post-Brexit deal](#) with the EU. As a result, the UK was free to pursue enhanced cooperation with other allies. The Guardian reported that Australia had been considering an alternative to the Attack-class submarine deal for at least 18 months.

### Military programs

The US and Australia had previously announced the joint development of a hypersonic missile.[28] The three countries are also members of the Joint Strike Fighter program.

## Features

### Nuclear-powered submarines

The AUKUS agreement will include provisions enabling Australia to obtain [nuclear-](#)

[powered submarines](#). Nuclear submarines have greater speed, can stay underwater for longer and can carry heavier loads than conventional submarines.

Currently, only six countries have nuclear submarines, the five permanent members of the [UN Security Council](#) (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States) and India. The US will supply [highly enriched uranium](#) (HEU) to Australia to power the submarines; Australia has agreed not to produce highly enriched uranium itself. [The United States' naval reactors](#) are all [pressurized water reactors](#) (PWR). The United Kingdom's [Rolls-Royce PWR3](#) is a new system based on a US design but using UK reactor technology.

#### US deployment in Australia USS *Virginia* underway in July 2004

Originally proposed in an interim release of the 2012 Force Posture Review, the deal could also involve American nuclear-powered [Virginia-class submarines](#) operating out of [HMAS Stirling](#) in [Perth](#).

In talks in Washington, D.C., between the US and Australian defence and foreign affairs ministers, Australian defence minister [Peter Dutton](#) said that the countries would be "significantly enhancing our force posture cooperation", including "greater air cooperation through rotational deployments of all types of US military aircraft to Australia", Dutton also flagged a potential increase in the number of US troops being deployed to [Darwin](#) on rotations, and more joint military exercises with the US, and with other regional partners, and more bases and equipment storage in Australia.

US defence secretary [Lloyd Austin](#) said the countries would look for more opportunities to joint engagements, flagging the presence of more US troops and aircraft based in Australia. Austin also played down speculation that the US would expect Australian concessions in exchange for the nuclear technology, such as Australia hosting intermediate range missiles.

#### Computer and cyber technology

The announcement of AUKUS included the stated aim of improving "joint capabilities and interoperability. These initial efforts will focus on cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities."

[Tom Tugendhat](#), chair of the [British Commons' Foreign Affairs Committee](#), later commented on Twitter that "Bringing together the military-industrial complex of these three allies together is a step-change in the relationship. We've always been interoperable, but this aims at much more.

From artificial intelligence to advanced technology the US, UK and Australia will now be able to cost save by increasing platform sharing and innovation costs. Particularly for the smaller two, that's game-changing."

*Engineering & Technology* pointed to the increasing expansion of Chinese technology firms such as [Huawei](#), which has been excluded from tendering for participation in telecommunications networks by the US and Australia on national security grounds, and government vetoes over the attempted Chinese acquisition of American company [Lattice Semiconductor](#) and ongoing British consideration of proposed takeovers of local semiconductor firms.

*Engineering & Technology* also pointed to the March 2021 statement of the US National Security Commission on AI, of the imperative to intensify local efforts but also "rally our closest allies and partners to defend and compete in the coming era of AI-accelerated competition and conflict".

#### Nuclear proliferation concerns

[The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty](#) allows non-nuclear-weapon states to produce the [highly enriched uranium](#) for naval reactor fuel. Nevertheless, the agreement to transfer US or UK nuclear submarine technology including possibly [highly enriched uranium](#) has been described as an

act of [nuclear proliferation](#), and has been criticised by scholars and politicians.

In the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, scholar Sébastien Philippe criticised AUKUS and wrote "we can now expect the proliferation of very sensitive military nuclear technology in the coming years, with literally tons of new nuclear materials under loose or no international safeguards."

James M Acton of the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) wrote that "the nonproliferation implications of the AUKUS submarine deal are both negative and serious. For Australia to operate nuclear-powered submarines, it will have to become the first non-nuclear-weapon state to exercise a loophole that allows it to remove nuclear material from the inspection system of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). I have no real concerns

that Australia will misuse this material itself, but I am concerned that this removal will set a damaging precedent. In the future, would-be proliferators could use naval reactor programs as cover for the development of nuclear weapons."

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[AUKUS: Recalling Legacies of Anglo Saxon supremacy](#) publicnews.in