

# We Need to Talk about AUKUS

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to act as a starting point for an informed discussion of AUKUS. It has been prepared by [Against the Wind](#), a new advocacy group.

While there are some aspects of AUKUS that you probably already understand, AUKUS is complex and this paper aims to give a brief overall view of the main issues. The media and certain politicians have tried to simplify AUKUS and portrayed it as being unquestionably good for Australia. This paper questions the unquestionable, but at the same time does not try to give simple answers. AUKUS is too important for that. Rather, it is the hope of this paper that there will be a much wider and more informed discussion of how Australia fits peacefully into the wider world and particularly the Asia Pacific region.

## What is AUKUS in a nutshell?

It is a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. According to the [Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS](#) it will “strengthen the ability of each to support our security and defense interests, ... promote deeper information and technology sharing ... deeper integration of security and defense-related science, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains ... and in particular, ... significantly deepen cooperation on a range of security and defense capabilities.”

The first initiative is to support Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy.

## What is the stated aim?

To help sustain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific Region according to the [Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS](#)

## Will AUKUS be useful in achieving this aim?

The strong supporters of AUKUS reply with a resounding yes. They argue that a relatively small country like Australia needs strong ties with powerful military allies to ensure our sovereignty. This appears self-evident to many people.

However, those who question the wisdom of AUKUS have raised numerous concerns:

### **1. Participation in wars more likely**

Closer ties will make it more difficult for Australia to refrain from participation in wars being fought by the US. It was a mistake for Australia to participate in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq at the encouragement of the US. Closer integrated ties with the US will make it even more difficult for Australia to abstain from such wars in the future.

While strengthening our sovereignty is often emphasised in the Australian Press, the [Whitehouse Background Press Call on AUKUS](#) had a quite different emphasis.

“I just want to underscore that this is a fundamental decision — fundamental — that binds decisively Australia to the United States and Great Britain for generations.”

A further complication is that in the recent past the US had a President who was at best dangerously erratic. The UK has had a similarly foolish Prime Minister. Such erratic and foolish leadership makes war more likely.

### **2. Loss of Australian control of own armed forces if war breaks out**

During the recent war in Afghanistan, it is alleged that because the Australian Defence Force ceded operational control to the Americans, the ADF leadership became disconnected from the forces on the ground. This was bad both operationally and culturally. As Brereton has succinctly pointed out in relation to Special Forces operations, “the devolution of operational command to the extent that the national command has no real oversight of the conduct of SF operations not only has the potential to result in the national interest and mission being overlooked or subordinated, but deprives national command of oversight of those operations.” (IGADF AFGHANISTAN INQUIRY REPORT, 328. Comment. Page 459)

### **3. Neglect of diplomacy**

An overdependence on military might and powerful friends can lull Australia into neglecting ongoing diplomacy as a means of reducing war, particularly in our region. In recent years funding and support of diplomacy has been neglected as is evident by our deteriorating relationship with our Pacific neighbours. A much stronger diplomatic effort needs to be made into the future and to be funded appropriately. Funding expensive nuclear submarines will not be in Australia’s best interest if it means less effort and money put into diplomacy.

#### **4. Can the USA and the UK be trusted to protect Australia if a major war breaks out?**

During WWII, the UK was unable to protect Australia, and the US only entered the war after Pearl Harbor was attacked. Major empires look after their own interests first, and only then consider the needs of smaller allies. The rules of Empire are about power in the first instance. In addition, both the UK and the US are going through periods of decline.

#### **5. Damage to other international relationships**

Certainly, in the initial stages, AUKUS damaged Australia's relationship with France, though this relationship is being repaired by the current government. More importantly is the perception that in AUKUS, Australia is retreating to a superior white Anglo alliance perspective that regards the rest of the world, particularly Asia, as secondary in importance.

#### **6. Need for more safeguards against corruption including whistle-blower protection.**

The international arms trade, [worth around US\\$200 billion a year](#), represents less than 1 per cent of world trade yet may account for about [40 per cent of its corruption](#). The legal trade in arms has long been known for its susceptibility to corruption. This is due to the high value and complexity of arms deals, the close association between the arms industry and political power, and the secrecy claimed necessary for national security: all of which shield arms-related activities from scrutiny.

In the US, the arms industry has unprecedented power over policy through lobbying and corruption. While the situation in Australia is not as bad, Government encouragement of the arms industry as a matter of policy has led to increasing infiltration of the public service, the ADF and other supposedly independent advice bodies by the arms industry. Examples include former ministers and high ranking public servants taking positions with the arms industry shortly after leaving their public positions. It is also significant that [Australia's performance](#) on anti-corruption measures has nosedived in recent years. Corruption results not only in much higher costs, but also the purchase of armaments that are not necessarily fit for purpose, but which are highly profitable to the lobbyists and arms manufacturers.

#### **7. Nuclear Proliferation**

While the proposed submarines will not possess nuclear warheads, they will be nuclear propelled and as such have complications with regard nuclear waste, and nuclear accident. In addition there are [concerns](#) raised by The Independent and Peaceful Australia Network (IPAN) that the AUKUS partnership is "completely at variance with the spirit of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)."

## **8. Are the proposed submarines the most useful for our defence?**

The main argument in favour of the new proposed submarines is that they are harder to detect than traditionally powered submarines. However, will this still be true in 10 to 20 years time? Also, the proposed submarines can make strikes into mainland China, which does not seem particularly defensive. Given the excessive cost of these submarines, are there better alternative ways of deterring invasion? For example, more smaller submarines better designed to defend the shallower waters round our coastline.

## **9. Too much money spent on armaments will mean less money spent on health, education and welfare.**

AUKUS is an expensive exercise. The French submarines that were cancelled were predicted to cost \$90 billion. The nuclear submarines envisaged by AUKUS will be even more expensive. The US presents a stark example of what can happen when a country overspends on the military and underspends on health, education and welfare. It is a major contributor to inequality. A country that is socially divided is much harder to defend.

## A Different Vision

In some ways the AUKUS treaty is embedded in an old, late capitalist vision of Australia in which the pursuit of individual wealth is built on exploitation and backed in the final instance by Imperial firepower. Integral to this older vision is a fear of the other, especially people of different colours or ethnicities.

Perhaps a better vision going forward is to be a true Commonwealth, where firstly the injustices done to the First Nations people are addressed, and then we ensure that all receive a fair share of our wealth, including sharing our wealth beyond our shores. As a peaceful country, it envisages that we be peacemakers in the world and not a deputy sheriff for one of the aging empires. If, as a last resort, our soldiers need to participate in wars beyond our shores it should be at the behest of the United Nations, not the United States, and such involvement should be approved in advance by our Federal Parliament.

## Get Involved

Against the Wind, a new advocacy group has prepared this discussion paper to encourage more open discussion. If you want to learn more about Against the Wind you can do so on our [webpage](#). You can also contact Against the Wind on [againstthewind.wvuc@gmail.com](mailto:againstthewind.wvuc@gmail.com).