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## Abstract

On 15 September 2021 Australia, the UK and the US announced the creation of the AUKUS partnership with the main aim being that of assisting the Australian Navy in the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs). The agreement has not come without controversy in the international realm; concerns were raised regarding the possibility that AUKUS would escalate tensions between China and Taiwan (Sabbagh et al. 2021). Nevertheless, despite vocal dissent from China and France, the agreement has gone ahead. The beginning of the Australian SSNs' military journey inevitably marks an important moment for the delineation of Indo-Pacific security lines. While American President Joe Biden insists that the arrival of submarines to the Australian coasts should not be understood as an act of aggression towards China (Holland & Brunnstrom, 2023), tensions remain in the region. This work assesses how the acquisition of SSNs has impacted Australian military capability and how the developments introduced in March 2023 have the potential to reshape contemporary nuclear warfare and the equilibrium of the Indo-Pacific region.

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## **AUKUS and Australia's quest for nuclear-powered submarines**

AUKUS can be regarded as an attempt to increase the interoperability of the Australian, British and American military industries (Perot, 2021). The agreement was not welcomed by important actors in the international scene namely France and China. The signing of AUKUS in fact meant that the previous submarine agreement between Australia and France lapsed amidst diplomatic turmoil between the EU/France and the US (Chang, 2022; Perot, 2021). Since 2021 however, relations between Australia and France have stabilised as Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese agreed to pay a settlement sum of 550 million euros to officially put an end to the diplomatic animosity between the two countries (Taylor, 2022).

AUKUS was created with the intention of enhancing security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (Cheng, 2022). This has also resulted in higher levels of integration in "defence-related science, technology, industry and supply chain" (Cheng, 2022, p. 1). The main reason behind the Australian desire for nuclear-powered submarines rests heavily on the emerging security threat posed by China, and in particular a desire to shift the military balance of power in the Indo-Pacific (Cheng 2022; Perot 2021). Such concerns have thus warranted a significant response to the extent that Australia is willingly accepting a "reduction in its strategic autonomy" within the AUKUS framework (Perot, 2021, p. 2). As such, the agreement is borne out of the belief that conflict with China will be less likely if deterrence is strengthened through international credibility (Shoebridge, 2021). The situation remains tedious for Australia however, as China remains its biggest commercial trading partner (Armstrong et al., 2023).

Concerning SSNs, these submarines differ from diesel-electric powered ones (SSKs) in that they do not require resurfacing as often as the latter, thus limiting their possibilities of detection. This is because, unlike SSKs which require fuel to operate, SSNs create their own energy through nuclear propulsion technology (Al Jazeera, 2023). Compared to SSKs, which are also regarded as conventional submarines, SSNs are usually bigger in size and require more costly maintenance (Al Jazeera, 2023). Nonetheless, through the AUKUS agreement, Australia will become the seventh country in the world to possess SSNs alongside the US, the UK, China, Russia, India and France.

Still, the employment of SSNs inevitably brings about questions regarding the risks of delineations of new conflicts both inside and outside the Indo-Pacific region. In particular, it is possible to identify two main points of concern in examining the repercussions of the AUKUS deal. Firstly, the concrete possibility that a "conventional conflict" can more likely become a "nuclear one" is present (Mian et al., 2019, p. 195). Secondly, the concrete possibility that an accident in the handling of the submarines could cause widespread radioactive releases, and as such have detrimental consequences for both public health and the environment (Mian et al. 2019, p. 195).

### **Developments since March 2023**

While in 2021 it remained unclear what the AUKUS deal would entail, since the new developments in March 2023 it is possible to better analyse the scope and implications of the agreement. On 13 March 2023, President Joe Biden, British PM Rishi Sunak and Australian PM Anthony Albanese announced

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the details of the AUKUS pact at the Naval Base Point Loma in San Diego (De Guzman, 2023). The trilateral defence agreement established that the US will provide three Virginia-class SSNs to Australian forces by the early 2030s with the option of purchasing two extra ones if needed (Australian Government Defence, 2023). The Virginia-class SSN is currently regarded as the fastest attack submarine possessed by the US Navy (De Guzman, 2023). However, as the Pacific is a nuclear weapons free-zone, particular emphasis has been placed on the fact that the submarines will be exclusively “nuclear-powered” and will not be equipped with nuclear weapons (Brennan, 2023, para. 15). This point was underlined by Chinese state media, which accused British, American and Australian leaders of going against the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), as AUKUS allows for the transfer of nuclear weaponry to a non-nuclear state (Hawkins, 2023). However, a significant grey area exists within the NPT, which allows for “fissile material used for non-explosive military use” to not undergo checks from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (Hawkins, 2023, para. 5). From this perspective then, AUKUS does not go against the NPT.

The deal has been described as “the most ambitious defence industrial partnership in recent history” (Townshend 2023, para. 1). This is because it is regarded as a significant turning point for the military capabilities of the three countries involved, with future projects already being outlined by its members. In particular, Sunak and Biden voiced their enthusiasm for the cooperation of British and American forces in the development of the SSN-AUKUS (Brennan, 2023). The SSN-AUKUS will act as the evolution of the UK’s SSNR (Submersible Ship Nuclear Replacement) and it will be the first time an SSN is developed by two countries geographically distant from each other and responsible for different parts of the operation (Thomas, 2023). The submarines will be built in Barrow-in-Furness, England (UK Ministry of Defence, 2023).

Furthermore, US and UK troops will assist their Australian counterparts in the transition by increasing submarine port visits during the course of the year and by organising the “rotational presence” of undersea craft in Perth to help with the training of the local forces (De Guzman 2023, para. 15). The first glimpses of the AUKUS deal will therefore be seen in the transition process, before the arrival of the SSNs. Moreover, a new bilateral defence agreement between the US and Papua New Guinea was announced on 22 May 2023, which ensures US forces will remain committed to securing their strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific (McCarthy, 2023).

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## Conclusion

The technological advancements brought about by Anglo-American cooperation will have a significant impact on Australian defence moving forward. Australia's acquisition of SSNs marks a significant moment for Australian defence as it undoubtedly increases its military capabilities for the years to come. While deterrence is framed as the priority when it comes to the acquisition of SSNs, AUKUS has significantly disturbed China and is set to continue to do so.

As tensions grow in the Indo-Pacific, so do nuclear warfare developments and their potentially devastating impacts to the international community. Still, AUKUS represents an important example of international military interoperability, which in different ways will help all three countries enhance their military power. While the end of the Australian-French agreement angered both French and EU officials, it is clear that new security threats have created new priorities for Australia. In a context of growing tensions in the Indo-Pacific region, and with the EU and NATO centered in helping fight off Russia's invasion of Ukraine (McCarthy, 2023), AUKUS may act not only as an instance of defence cooperation, but as a framework example for other interoperability trajectories moving forward.

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