



## NEW ZEALAND AND AUKUS: AFFECTED WITHOUT BEING INCLUDED

BY ROBERT AYSON

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Seventy years ago Australia and New Zealand cut a deal with the United States. In exchange for accepting Washington's generous peace agreement with Tokyo while they were still concerned about Japan's intentions, Canberra and Wellington got a [security treaty](#). A side-deal, at America's insistence, was that the new alliance would not include the United Kingdom. Even the legendary UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who had returned to 10 Downing Street before the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (or ANZUS) went into effect, was unable to get the United Kingdom added to the threesome.

In 2021 the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) security pact appears to have turned the tables. This time the United Kingdom is one of three, alongside Australia and the United States, and it is New Zealand's turn to be left out. As the feelings of surprise wear off, some New Zealand commentators have found an easy explanation for their country's exclusion. AUKUS means that Australia was in line to get nuclear-propelled submarines. New Zealand couldn't belong because of its nuclear-free policy, which includes [propulsion](#) in addition to weapons.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern appeared to confirm this hypothesis. While [signalling](#) her government's support for "the increased engagement of the UK and US in the region," she also [confirmed](#) that nuclear-powered Australian submarines would not be permitted to operate in New

Zealand's internal waters (i.e., within the 12-nautical-mile zone).

But there are other, more convincing explanations. First, New Zealand isn't in the submarine operating game. When (and if) the new subsurface vessels arrive, they will join a list of Australian commitments to advanced maritime combat capabilities for which New Zealand has no equivalents. The existing (conventionally propelled) Collins Class submarines, Air Warfare Destroyers, and Joint Strike Fighters are three other examples of this long-standing trend. New Zealand isn't in the same capability league that Australia is set to play in with its two AUKUS partners. From a military technological standpoint, it would have made more sense to include Japan or the Republic of Korea than to contemplate a place for New Zealand.

Second, AUKUS will enhance Australia's already extensive military integration with US forces. That's a position only a very active ally of the United States could occupy. For the United Kingdom, another close US ally, AUKUS helps build London's Indo-Pacific and trans-Atlantic credentials after Brexit. It's true that New Zealand has been enjoying much [warmer security relations](#) with Washington since deploying forces to Afghanistan after 9/11. There is the Five Eyes relationship as well. But formal ANZUS alliance relations between the United States and New Zealand have been suspended for more than three decades.

Third, AUKUS represents an elevated commitment among its three members, and especially between the United States and Australia, to confront China's growing power in maritime East Asia. Any nuclear-powered submarines based in Australia, whether leased or owned by Canberra, will be an intrinsic part of a US-led order of battle for missions focused on China's People's Liberation Army. Concerns about China's impact on regional stability have been growing in New Zealand's national security community for much of the past decade. But Wellington still wants some separation from US-led efforts to treat China as an adversary, and from Canberra's most strident criticisms of Beijing.

AUKUS would be a step too far in that context. But that's still where the rub will hit New Zealand. Since

the ANZUS crisis with Washington in the mid-1980s, governments in Wellington have come to see Australia as New Zealand's *one and only* formal military ally. Their [major statements](#) of defense policy routinely include a commitment to respond should Australia come under armed attack. This does not mean that wherever Australia goes, New Zealand is bound to follow, but it does mean that Australia's defense policy has an oversized impact on New Zealand's choices.

Even before any new submarines arrive on the other side of the Tasman Sea (and they could be [nearly two decades away](#)), AUKUS could bring more of the US competition with China closer to New Zealand's neck of the woods. There will be a greater presence of US warfighting platforms and personnel at Australian bases and ports. There is likely to be an even deeper integration of warning and strategic intelligence systems. More Australian targets are likely to feature in China's war plans. Year by year New Zealand's alliance commitment to the defense of Australia will carry bigger implications.

Wellington's public expressions of alliance unity across the Tasman don't entertain coming to Australia's aid in a great power conflict further north. But this doesn't necessarily forestall the possibility of an unwanted entanglement. When Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison was in Queenstown for a May summit with Ardern, he was asked what his government would expect from New Zealand if Australia got caught up in a war over the South China Sea or Taiwan. He [indicated](#) the answer lay in the ANZUS Treaty.

Australia's latest partnership may give New Zealand's extra reason to be concerned about Canberra's approach to China in East Asian hotspots. Barely a day after the AUKUS announcement, Australia's Foreign and Defence Ministers were in Washington for their annual AUSMIN meeting with US counterparts. The resulting [statement](#) broke new ground for US-Australian expressions of support for Taiwan. In a television interview conducted while he was still in Washington, and which was [reported](#) in one of New Zealand's leading newspapers, Peter Dutton intimated that Australia would follow the lead

of its US ally in the event that China sought to absorb Taiwan.

A few days later, New Zealand Minister of Foreign Affairs Nanaia Mahuta refused to be drawn in by a New Zealand journalist on Taiwan hypotheticals involving China, the United States, and Australia. But she [emphasised](#) New Zealand's close relationships with traditional partners and noted that New Zealand vessels were presently exercising in East Asian waters. In a later write up, the New Zealand Defence Force [explained](#) that it had been operating "in the South East Asia region for decades as part of bilateral and regional defence engagement," including with its partners in the [50-year-old] Five Power Defence Arrangements. But this was no ordinary trip. The NZDF [also indicated](#) that New Zealand forces had been working "off Guam" alongside the United Kingdom's Carrier Strike Group led by the (conventionally powered) HMS Queen Elizabeth and had been exercising and training with US carrier battle groups led by the *nuclear-propelled* USS Ronald Reagan and USS Carl Vinson).

How do you stay connected but retain autonomy? Ardern's government argues that New Zealand sees AUKUS through a "Pacific" lens, intimating some separation from the great power competition which the new partnership intensifies. While New Zealand now refers to its wider region in Indo-Pacific terms, Ardern's definitive [speech](#) on the subject emphasized inclusiveness, multilateralism, and regional cooperation. But Wellington doesn't get to write the region's overall narrative. All manner of interpretations and [connections](#) will be made by others when the atmosphere is feverish. Bit by bit, New Zealand is getting closer to the flame. It doesn't have to be a member to be affected by the bow waves that are likely to grow now that AUKUS is here.

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