



AUKUS' SHORT- AND LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS FOR TAIWAN

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More than a mere pact over submarines, the Australia-United Kingdom-United States trilateral (AUKUS) signifies the crossing of a strategic threshold by Washington and its partners, past robust competition and toward outright confrontation. This, naturally, has significant implications for Taiwan's security.

By agreeing to afford Australia access to nuclear naval propulsion and other advanced strategic technologies—a first since the US-UK Mutual Defense Agreement of 1958—AUKUS fortifies the US-led order to deter military challenges in the region. AUKUS, of course, has the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime in mind. This strengthening of the defense relationship with Canberra, even at the expense of political fallout with Paris, signals to Beijing that Washington (and its partners) are preparing in case of conflict.

Taiwan is where such conflict looks likely, given the irredentist claims by China, the significance of its geography to major regional powers (e.g., the United States, or Japan), and its critical role in the global supply chain.

Nuclear-powered submarines (or SSNs, as the US Navy calls them) will give Australia the range, transit speed, and endurance to provide meaningful presence in the Taiwan Strait. Moreover, SSNs are one of the few assets able to penetrate and conduct sustained operations within China's anti-access area-denial, particularly in combination with submarine-launched cruise missiles. The other long-range strike capabilities provisioned under AUKUS (Tomahawk cruise missiles for the Hobart-class destroyers, air-to-surface missiles for Royal Australian Air Force fighter aircraft, precision strike missiles, and US-Australian

collaborative development of hypersonic missiles) will also strengthen Australia's capacity to support US military operations in first-island-chain contingencies.

What's more, AUKUS signals strengthened British security commitments to the Indo-Pacific, already demonstrated by the HMS Queen Elizabeth carrier strike group's 28-week deployment to the region.

These contribute to enhancing the so-called "integrated deterrence" championed by the Biden administration, particularly Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin.

Implications for Taiwan

Though heartened by AUKUS, Taipei remains cautious about its significance for its security.

If AUKUS partners are committed to deterring China from conquering Taiwan, the three governments must reassess their policy regarding defense cooperation with the island. For example, London still imposes strict restrictions on defense exports to Taipei. Canberra, for its part, has long forbidden direct contact between Taiwanese officials with Australian defense establishment outside of the military education system. Not surprisingly, then, Taipei is prudent in its expectations of any realignment of Canberra's security cooperation posture, especially given Australia's economic interdependence with China.

The United States has begun making headway towards enhancing Taiwan's defense while managing tensions with China. One example appears to be quietly encouraging a select number of allies to loosen restrictions on security cooperation with Taipei, including defense technology, intelligence, and other exchanges. Similar policy realignment should be among priority considerations for AUKUS countries.

AUKUS countries, meanwhile, are unlikely to deploy additional military capabilities to change the power balance in the Taiwan Strait by 2027, when US-based sources say the threat of Chinese invasion is most severe. Current Australian power projection assets are limited to six Collins-class conventionally powered submarines, with the deployment of nuclear submarines still over a decade away. Also unclear is Britain's willingness and ability to rapidly base and sustain substantive capabilities in the Indo-Pacific that would contribute to deterring and, if necessary, winning a major military conflict with China.

AUKUS' significance to Taiwan, therefore, is primarily over the long term.

Near-term options

AUKUS countries should advance an ambitious security cooperation agenda focused on a Taiwan Strait conflict scenario. At a strategic level, they should participate in joint war planning. At the operational level, they should consider a joint working group to ensure interoperability—including, most importantly, with Taiwan forces and C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) systems.

Between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, there should be discussions about assisting Taiwan with defense systems and/or related technology, which can help alleviate the severe arms embargo Beijing imposes on Taipei. AUKUS countries should also explore expanded participation through track-2 discussions on collective measures for countering gray-zone threats, improving regional interoperability, and enhancing intelligence sharing.

In the short-term, however, even before such measures are enacted, AUKUS signals to Taiwan that key countries are now willing to push back more seriously against Beijing's rising military assertiveness. It suggests to Taipei that outside help is increasing, making its leaders more resolute in the fight for its own defense and survival, which is critical to strengthen deterrence against Chinese military adventurism.

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