



HOW AUKUS ADVANCES AUSTRALIA'S COMMITMENT TO COLLECTIVE DEFENSE

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Canberra's [announcement](#) that it will acquire nuclear-powered submarines through its new defense pact with London and Washington, AUKUS, has generated considerable scrutiny. The decision to [expand](#) the basing and rotational presence of US forces in Australia has added to the heat. But in the [breathless commentary](#) on these moves, what they tell us about Australia's foreign and defense policy has been largely misunderstood.

These announcements don't signal a new direction in Australian strategic policy or a reorientation of our alignment preferences away from the region.

To the contrary, they mark an acceleration of Australia's [push](#) to assume a larger and [more active](#) geostrategic role in upholding a favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific—both by acquiring advanced military and defense industrial capabilities and by supporting the strongest possible US security presence in our region, including through longstanding efforts to deepen high-end military integration between Australia and the United States.

The strategy behind these announcements isn't new either. It's articulated in Australia's 2017 foreign policy white paper and 2020 defense strategic update. Underscored by deep anxieties over China's growing power and assertiveness, and a clear-eyed assessment

of America's eroding regional military position, these documents recognize that Washington can no longer defend the Indo-Pacific strategic order by itself. Together, they lay out the case for a stronger Australia and our pursuit of a [collective regional strategy](#) to supplement America's position and constrain Chinese power.

Look at the language. The [white paper](#) talks about "building a more capable, agile and potent Australian Defence Force" and working collectively with the United States and like-minded partners to "limit the exercise of coercive power" and to "support a balance in the region [favorable] to our interests." The [defense update](#) says that "Australia [will] take greater responsibility for our own security" by growing our "self-reliant ability to deliver deterrence effects," enhancing "the lethality of the ADF for ... high-intensity operations," and being more capable of "support[ing] the United States and other partners" in our region "if deterrence measures fail" and "Australia's national interests are engaged."

Both documents call for broadening and deepening Australia's cooperation with the US, including by enhancing force posture initiatives and military interoperability and by "selectively increasing interdependence with the US and other partners" to assure our shared defense industrial, munitions and logistics supply chains.

Those surprised by Australia's decisions haven't been paying attention.

Of course, there is—or should be—[much more to Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy](#) than this high-end alliance integration agenda. Shaping our strategic environment, deepening our regional partnerships and building our influence by supporting regional countries' own priorities are critical. Some of these elements are [progressing well](#), like our security networking with Japan, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore. Others are [worryingly underdone](#), such as our investment in diplomacy, economic engagement, and development assistance in Southeast Asia.

But just because these issues and partnerships weren't at the center of last week's announcements [doesn't](#)

[mean AUKUS or the US alliance are displacing](#) the other elements of our strategy.

Indeed, it's worth remembering that the only revolution last week was Washington's [once-a-century decision](#) to share its submarine nuclear-propulsion technology with an ally—something Canberra has [quietly wanted](#) for years, and a decisive [capability upgrade](#), but not a sea-change in the trajectory of Australian strategy.

So why the hype about a purported [Anglospheric pivot](#) and [new dependency](#) on the alliance?

One explanation lies in the confusing [pomp and ceremony](#) that accompanied the made-for-television AUKUS announcement. Amid the flags and mawkish talk of a “forever partnership,” it looked very much like a new alliance and conjured unhelpful images of English-speaking nations throwing their weight around the Indo-Pacific.

But AUKUS is [neither an alliance](#) nor a vehicle for strategic policy coordination. It's basically a memorandum of understanding for sharing advanced technology, defense industrial capabilities, and technical know-how—one that will hopefully build on the expanded [US national technology and industrial base](#) that has struggled to break down export controls between the US and Australia. If effective, it should provide two-way benefits akin to a defense free-trade zone, empowering Australia's pursuit of cutting-edge capabilities and filtering Australian innovation into US (and UK) defense projects—the kind of defense industrial integration Canberra has [wanted for some time](#).

This raises a second reason for heightened concern: the risk that we will become gravely reliant on US technology by buying nuclear-powered submarines and other new kit. It's true that co-developing a boat with the US and UK will require their support to design, build, and service it. But this was also true of the French submarine, which was to be [outfitted](#) with US weapons and sensors.

More to the point, the ADF is already irreversibly dependent on American technology. The engines on our P-8A anti-submarine warfare aircraft (and most

others) are [maintained](#) in the US, our F-35s and EA-18G Growlers [rely on](#) sensitive US data, most of our munitions are made in America, and our entire military depends on US satellites and other systems to talk to itself. An AUKUS-built submarine hardly poses a new problem.

Nor is it the case that buying US technology will necessarily leave us vulnerable to abandonment or entrapment. The [suggestion](#) that America must be prepared to fight for primacy in Asia to keep servicing our submarines is far-fetched to say the least. On the flipside, those who argue Australia's pursuit of nuclear-powered submarines will [bind us](#) to US war plans [over Taiwan](#) fail to appreciate how hard that would be in practice. We're not doing freedom-of-navigation patrols now, despite persistent US requests.

Indeed, one reason Washington has been reluctant to share nuclear-propulsion and other exquisite technology with allies is precisely because such capabilities [provide independent options](#), making allies potentially less pliant. Australia currently enjoys, and must protect, a high degree of self-reliance within the alliance. Rather than jeopardizing that, AUKUS could support the establishment of deep maintenance and sustainment facilities for the new submarines in Australia, along with a [“sovereign guided weapons and explosive ordnance enterprise”](#) so that we can build high-end munitions, thereby increasing our sovereign industrial capabilities. This may not be a given, and Canberra [must push for it](#). But it's simply not true that AUKUS is categorically riskier or all one-way in a dependency sense.

A final cause of concern relates to the Australia-US decision to advance new air, land and sea force-posture initiatives on Australian soil, which many [worry](#) will turn us into a US military outpost. In addition to increasing the already high number of US warplanes rotating through Australia, the real significance of this decision will be the [establishment](#) of a combined maritime logistics, sustainment, and maintenance facility. This [will enable](#) Australian, US, and other allied warships and submarines to rotate through Western Australia on a more regular basis, and undertake deeper refurbishment work there, allowing for expanded

operations and more time spent in the Indo-Pacific—which is particularly important given that American dry-dock and maintenance facilities are strained and distant.

These decisions aren't to be taken lightly and do position Australia to be a staging post for US power projection and military operations. But they are [not new choices](#). They represent sovereign decisions expanded by Canberra with bipartisan support ever since Prime Minister Julia Gillard [launched](#) the 2011 Australia-US force posture initiatives. And they get us back to the core purpose of Australia's increasingly active defense strategy: sustaining the strongest possible US military presence in the region and playing a more significant collective defense role ourselves.

Critics of AUKUS and the alliance need to be more responsible. Australia is about to acquire one of the world's most potent military capabilities because of the alliance and Washington's readiness to empower our armed forces. The capability itself is a [big deal](#)—lethal and high-endurance submarines are the best way to deter Chinese aggression. But in form the AUKUS deal is little different from the way we've got US defense technology in the past, save for the fact that we now have an opportunity for more transfers of technology and technical know-how to Australia. Negotiating appropriate [terms and conditions](#) for this pact is crucial. But we must remember that AUKUS and the new force posture initiatives [aren't a break with the past](#)—they're part of our ongoing push to accelerate Australia's contribution to collective defense in the region.

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