



BUILDING ON AUKUS TO FORGE A PAX PACIFICA

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America's offer to supply British and US nuclear submarine technology to Australia (AUKUS) became a political fact almost instantly. President Biden and prime ministers Boris Johnson and Scott Morrison announced it. Yet, whatever its outcome, if it's just limited to building subs, it's unlikely to deter Beijing. To accomplish that and create a real Pax Pacifica, Washington will have to up its ante and forge additional strategic technology collaborations between Japan, South Korea, and Europe.

What will happen if Washington doesn't? Seoul and Tokyo could go their own way. Having been rebuffed after asking Washington to help it build nuclear submarines in 2020, South Koreans now [wonder](#) why Washington just said yes to Australia. Assuming Seoul proceeds with its plans, though, it would squander billions on nuclear submarines [unlikely to perform well](#) in the closed and shallow seas that surround Korea. Worse, it would give Seoul a pretext to enrich uranium for its subs with plants that could also produce weapons-grade material for bombs. Japan would hardly stand for this. Count on it, and possibly others, developing additional nuclear

weapons options, straining rather than strengthening America's security ties in the region.

This, however, is hardly inevitable. Washington, Tokyo, Seoul, Canberra, and Europe could create a Pax Pacifica by tightening the nuclear rules and collaborating on new, cutting-edge technological projects. The aim would be to get China to realize that any regional hot war it might threaten in the short run would only further catalyze a larger cool competition against it that it would likely lose.

How might the United States and its allies pull this off? One way, recently [suggested](#) by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, would be to amplify the Australian-UK-US deal's nonnuclear features—its space cooperation, unmanned underwater warfare systems development, and advanced computing and missile collaboration—and open them up to the participation of Japan, South Korea, and others as appropriate.

Washington also could forge new collaborations. One might be an ROK-French-US (ROKFUS) initiative to build an enhanced space surveillance system that, among other things, could aim to eliminate the [blind spots](#) the moon's brightness creates near it for our ground-based telescopes. France, the hips of the European Space Agency and NATO's space command, should be interested. So should Seoul, which otherwise is poised to waste billions on unnecessary space launch systems and redundant navigational satellite constellations. Meanwhile, the project's surveillance system could keep track of Chinese military and civil satellites, including those near the moon, [threatening](#) critical US and allied satellites in geostationary orbits.

Another useful project would be to have Germany, as the European Union's lead, work with Japan and the United States on advanced computer and communications systems that could help crack codes, secure communications, and open up closed internet systems. This deal (DEJPUS?) could exploit Japan's, Europe's and America's considerable accomplishments in these fields, Japan's and Germany's [current cooperation](#) on advanced computing, and help assure US and European markets for the systems the undertaking might generate. This,

after China's rush to tap the European 5G market, would be no mean accomplishment. It also could help penetrate Beijing's Great Firewall, which tracks and censors open communications in and outside China.

These additional initiatives could include additional participants. Their aim would be to reduce Japan's and South Korea's incentives to go their own way (or nuclear); encourage Europe's democracies to engage more deeply with those of the Pacific; and create peaceful counters to Chinese economic, military, and diplomatic forms of intimidation.

Sound too good to ever be true? It may be. Certainly, there's one question [Chinese](#) and [Russian](#) critics of AUKUS raise that could make all this stillborn: Isn't sharing nuclear submarine technology with Australia directly at odds with reining in nuclear risks? For many, the answer is yes. It ought to be just the opposite.

Former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans has publicly [supported AUKUS](#) so long as Australia keeps clear of enriching its own uranium. Scott Morrison's Australia's Liberal Party, which enjoys a mere one-seat majority in Australia's House, seems to be listening: Prime Minister Morrison recently stated that Canberra does not intend to develop [a civilian nuclear program](#). Even if it did, Australia has no need to enrich uranium or reprocess spent reactor fuels. As such, Australia could follow the UAE and Taiwan's example by forswearing these activities in its nuclear cooperative agreement with the United States.

This could be done by amending the existing US-Australia nuclear cooperative agreement or 123, which currently prohibits the transfer of any controlled US nuclear technology for any military purpose. Agreeing legally to forgo enriching and reprocessing also has the advantage of short-circuiting nuclear proliferation critics at the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference this coming January. Finally, it would help further restrain South Korea, which would like to enrich uranium and reprocess US-origin spent fuel but is prohibited from doing so by its current nuclear cooperative agreement with Washington.

As for concerns regarding highly enriched uranium, which would fuel the subs but could also help make nuclear weapons, both the US Los Angeles and the British Astute-class submarines use this fuel. Their reactor cores, however, do not require refueling for [33 years or more](#) and cannot be serviced without cutting open the hulls. Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom should exploit this by announcing that either the United States or the UK will retain title to the fuel, so Australia will have no need to touch it.

Combine that with a legally binding pledge not to enrich or reprocess and additional American-European strategic technological collaboration with Japan and South Korea, and Washington could set the stage not only for less nuclear proliferation but a Pax Pacifica with real staying power.

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