



***JOINING THE BATTLE FOR THE  
NARRATIVE: THE CASE FOR AN  
AUKUS INFORMATION SERVICE***

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AUKUS is [back in the news](#) again, this time because the US Navy has asked to order just one Virginia-class submarine in fiscal 2025, compared with the target of 2.3 hulls needed to meet US needs and to supply Australia as well.

The building rate is likely to [rise](#), but the news has provided grist for critics of the security grouping. And support for the Australian-UK-US security partnership is already weaker among the general public than in the navies, defense ministries, and defense industries involved in it.

AUKUS badly needs a public diplomacy arm. Led by the foreign services, such a unit could explain the purpose of the partnership, counter

misunderstanding and disinformation about it, especially from China, and coordinate external communications of the partners. There's a precedent for this: the NATO Information Service set up in 1950.

An AUKUS Information Service would have plenty to do. The flurry of questions about AUKUS that followed news of the Virginia-class order was not the first mini-crisis for the partnership and won't be the last. Committed opponents can be expected to exploit any bad news.

In Britain and Australia, a small but raucous coalition of isolationists, pacifists, and anti-nuclear people has coalesced against the agreement. Many critics in Australia dislike it for implying a strategic decision to align more closely with the US against China. Others are skeptical that the UK is a reliable and consequential partner.

A Guardian Essential [poll](#) published this month found that barely half as many Australians wanted their country to be a US ally as those who wanted it to be “an independent middle power with influence in the Asia-Pacific region.” A similar poll from March 2023 showed that support for AUKUS among Australians had fallen below 50%.

In Britain, AUKUS has sometimes been brought into the Brexit debate, with critics seeing it as part of an effort to draw the country away from Europe. Meanwhile, in the US, AUKUS has been [criticized](#) for weakening American deterrence and warfighting capability against China by agreeing to sell submarines from the US fleet to Australia. The concern is acute because of the lack of US

submarine construction capacity (the likely cause of the request for just one boat in 2025).

Meanwhile, China has tried to frame AUKUS negatively across the Indo-Pacific. When the partner countries announced the agreement in September 2021, the Chinese foreign ministry warned them to abandon their “Cold War” mentality and said they had “seriously undermined regional peace and stability, aggravated the arms race and hurt international non-proliferation efforts.” Beijing has since maintained this line of attack.

This framing of AUKUS as “disruptive,” fueling an “arms race,” and breaking “non-proliferation norms” was amplified quickly across Southeast Asia. Ismail Sabri Yaakob, then Malaysia’s prime minister, [stressed](#) his commitment to Southeast Asia as a neutral and nuclear weapons-free zone, while Indonesia’s foreign ministry voiced similar views.

Sir Stephen Lovegrove, a former British national security adviser, [described](#) AUKUS as “the most significant capability collaboration anywhere in the world in the past six decades.” But AUKUS governments cannot stand back and expect the public in all three countries to understand its importance without help.

They must be provided with clear factual information about the intentions, processes, and, yes, challenges to accomplishing the AUKUS mission. A mechanism is required to engage with the public inside all three countries and further afield.

In May 1950, shortly after the founding of NATO, its governing body, the North Atlantic Council, determined to “Promote and coordinate public information in furtherance of

the objectives of the Treaty while leaving responsibility for national programs to each country.” Three months later the alliance set up an Information Service.

It answered to two working groups: one on information policy and the other on social and cultural cooperation. In 1953 the two working groups were merged to form the Committee on Information and Cultural Relations, and in 2004 that became the Committee on Public Diplomacy.

Similar to NATO’s Public Diplomacy Division, an AUKUS Information Service could undertake the basic task of informing the public about AUKUS’ purpose, activities, and policies to a wide audience. It would use such tools as a website, online magazine, other publications, conferences, and social media. These would focus on younger generations to increase familiarity with the agreement and its long-term importance to the three nations’ security.

The AUKUS Public Diplomacy Service would also push back against false and fictitious narratives. It would correct misconceptions and challenge hostile discourse, particularly disinformation and misinformation from China and Russia targeted at Southeast Asia and other middle-ground countries.

Furthermore, it would project a positive image of the agreement and its objectives, to build trust and support.

And the information service would act as an information hub, by coordinating communications with such organizations as think tanks, universities, and the media, which would amplify the AUKUS message.

The AUKUS Information Service would be leaner and nimbler than NATO's Public Diplomacy Division, since it would have only three partners to serve rather than 32. It could also be given maximum leverage to experiment with new ideas and mediums of communication.

Since AUKUS is intended to be a decades-long, resource-intensive trilateral effort touching the armed forces and defence-industrial sectors of the three nations, the cacophony of opposition cannot go unaddressed.

Constructive, evidence-based criticism from within the AUKUS nations and their allies and partners is of course justified and even welcomed, because the challenges to delivering the agreement are large. But AUKUS is too important to fail in an era of disinformation and [discursive statecraft](#). A vigorous programme of public diplomacy is needed to support it.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*