



AUKUS AND JAPAN: WHERE TO FROM HERE?

BY ADIL CADER

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Photo: President Joe Biden participates in a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Fumio Kishida of Japan, Thursday May 18, 2023. Source: Official White House Photo by Adam Schultz

Last week, I attended a panel discussion in Perth, Australia, on the growing strategic importance of AUKUS to Western Australia. Hosted by the University of Western Australia's Defence and Security Institute, the panel featured academic and think-tank representatives from the three AUKUS countries: Australia, the UK, and the US.

Although AUKUS has dominated Western Australian and broader regional foreign policy circles for the last two years, I will provide a brief overview. AUKUS is a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK, and the US, consisting of two pillars. Pillar 1, which has consumed much of the Australian media discussion, involves the UK and the USA assisting Australia in acquiring nuclear-powered submarines.

Pillar 2 focuses on jointly developing advanced technological capabilities in areas such as cyber technology, hypersonics, and radar capability.

The panel discussion, which included questions from audience members across military, industry, and government sectors, focused on the various economic benefits to Western Australia. According to [Australian Department of Defence estimates](#), over three thousands of jobs and up to 8 billion Australian Dollars (5.3 billion US Dollars) could be injected into the Australian economy. Further flow-on benefits, such as tourism opportunities were also brought up. With an expected 700 US Navy personnel, the potential for family trips and visits from friends and relatives could have a significant impact. Additionally, it has opened up talks of direct flights (a first) between Perth and the US. However, there were concerns about the longevity of these benefits, especially with potential upcoming changes in the governments of two of the involved countries. The panel also discussed mixed reaction in the Asian region to the introduction of nuclear submarines for Australia.

Leaving aside the wider geostrategic and political implications, the location of Western Australia as the home for the submarines has dominated discussions among Perth's strategic circles. However, a particular question that was raised (and not covered in the main discussion) by an audience member made me think and became the focus of this piece: What about the discussion on Japan joining AUKUS (JAUKUS, perhaps?) and its implications?

Back in April this year, AUKUS Defence Ministers [expressed interest](#) in Japan joining AUKUS. This followed speculation after an earlier [Wall Street Journal article](#) by the American Ambassador to Japan showed support for this. It is considered that the US is the biggest supporter of Japan joining the initiative. It should be noted that the invitation to join AUKUS would only apply to Pillar 2 on technological cooperation, as Pillar 1 on nuclear-powered submarines will not be expanded due to the sensitive nature of the project.

Indonesia, which has long been one of the vital players in the region economically and politically, had

serious reservations when the AUKUS project was announced. Indonesia's concerns soon became Australia's concern (given the strategic importance the country has to Australia) as well as potentially the concerns of the US and UK, who look to Australia as an economic gateway to the Indo-Pacific. Back in 2021, President Jokowi raised serious concerns about military buildup in the Indo-Pacific. While not specifically stated, some foreign policy analysts also [expressed](#) concern that AUKUS was a projection of the Anglosphere into the region, causing further suspicion among the general population of the Asian countries.

Japan's involvement could potentially alleviate both these concerns. Firstly, by being involved through Pillar 2, it highlights the non-nuclear side of the arrangement and presents its sharing capabilities beyond pure military aspects. Secondly, Japan's standing in the Asian region as a respected partner would help mitigate the perception of AUKUS as an Anglosphere project. Japan could serve as a bridge between ASEAN and AUKUS, alleviating some of the original concerns.

There are several areas where Japan can add value to Pillar 2 initiatives. Japan has recently boosted its electronic warfare capabilities to match the levels of Russia and China, as highlighted in their most recent national defense strategy. Despite being hindered by its population size and the availability of qualified experts, joining AUKUS would allow all four countries to receive greater assistance in protecting their networks. This would be a priority given recent high-level hackings in the US and Australia.

Another area where Japan could contribute is underwater drones capable of removing sea mines, an area where Japan has been investing and developing capabilities. This is also something that the current AUKUS countries are looking to improve upon. Additionally, the Japanese Defence Forces have been investing in space security, which is of great value to AUKUS. With China's increasing use of space for military purposes, such as capabilities to destroy satellites, Japan's Ministry of Defence has been developing technology to counteract this, which

would be extremely important to AUKUS, especially given its growing space force.

With further investments in AI, anti-drone lasers, and robot technology, there is a strong case for the value Japan would bring to AUKUS Pillar 2. Coupled with the various bilateral security arrangements Japan has with the AUKUS members, it would be a seamless transition. However, there are still lingering concerns over Japan's suitability. [Polls](#) show around half the population is unhappy with constitutional revisions that allow for Japanese Self Defence Forces to help allies. Many commentators see Japan's security apparatus in peacetime mode. [Another poll](#) showed that only 39% of Japanese agree that they should join AUKUS. Even from a Pillar 2 perspective, there are concerns about the cultural and social reactions of the population to joining such an initiative.

Further concern is the lack of a security clearance system, making it difficult for Japan to share classified information. However, in February 2024, the Japanese government made steps to improve this through a new security clearance system, which even Kurt Campbell, US Deputy Secretary of State, acknowledged as an improvement.

In conclusion, while Japan's potential inclusion in AUKUS presents significant strategic and technological benefits, it is crucial to address the cultural, social, and logistical concerns to ensure a smooth and effective integration.

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