



## **“OPTIMAL PARTNER”—JAPAN’S ROLE IN PILLAR II OF AUKUS**

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In his January [confirmation hearing](#), Secretary of State Marco Rubio called the AUKUS agreement a “[blueprint](#)” for other US partnerships—stressing the ability of the agreement to “(create) a geopolitical and strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.” As the AUKUS agreement comes up on the fourth anniversary of its signing, Rubio’s comments have again driven consideration to potentially expanding Pillar II of the agreement beyond the three original signatories. As the US looks to build on the AUKUS model, expanding the reach of Pillar II is a logical next step. While there are several attractive partners across the Indo-Pacific and the wider global community, Japan’s unique combination of scale, capability, and trustworthiness make it the best candidate for such an expansion.

### **Scale and innovation: The case for Pillar II expansion**

Compared to the submarine-focused Pillar I, AUKUS pillar II is a broad agreement, encompassing eight “streams of effort” across a variety of high-technology sectors. Pillar II is a response to growing Chinese technology leadership and its impact on Indo-Pacific security. ASPI’s [Critical Tech Tracker](#) has noted that China is now the leader in high-impact research in 57 of 64 critical technologies, including many covered by the AUKUS partnership. By driving cross-partner

innovation, Pillar II can help disrupt China’s research dominance and maintain credible Indo-Pacific deterrence.

At its simplest, innovation is a product of mass, knowledge, and resources. The more people you have working on a problem, the more likely it is that one or more will come up with an improvement or solution. The more knowledge these people have, and the more varied it is, the faster innovation will occur. And of course, the more resources, financial and otherwise, are put at the disposal of companies and researchers, the more easily they will be able to generate and exploit new insights.

AUKUS Pillar II cuts to the heart of this issue. Just as Michael Sharpe [called](#) AUKUS “one big factory,” Pillar II is also “one big laboratory.” Combining the research and development capabilities of the three AUKUS states will help to reduce research redundancy and encourage research collaboration. Moreover, a combined market and industrial base can both support innovation and help to realize new ideas. While AUKUS is a good first step in this process, the UK and Australia are not the only US partners who can contribute to the innovation effort in a significant way. Indeed, expanding Pillar II to encompass a wider set of partners will only increase its benefits to the US and its partners.

### **Japan: The optimal partner**

In deciding potential partners for an expanded Pillar II, two overarching factors should be considered. First, partners with large markets and existing technology leadership will provide the most value. Second, partners must be trustworthy, lest sensitive technology be leaked to enemy countries. Thus, Pillar II must be expanded diligently, only looking to the most secure and reliable partners, which are bound not only by interests but also a shared history of cooperation.

It is easy to see how Japan fits these criteria. Japan is a leader in global innovation. According to ASPI’s Critical Tech Tracker, Japan is ranked as a top five research leader in eight of 64 key technological fields. The World Intellectual Property Organization, meanwhile, ranks Japan as the [13th-most innovative](#)

global economy, with high-performing innovation clusters in chemistry and computer science. Japan's [shipbuilding industry](#) is the world's third largest, with one of the world's most mature maritime clusters. Finally, as the world's [fourth-largest economy](#), Japan is also well-positioned to provide the financial resources necessarily to supercharge Pillar II programming.

Japan also has a wealth of experience with defense technology cooperation. It has engaged in several high-profile multinational defense projects, including with Italy and the UK on the [GCAP](#) sixth-generation fighter program, and the Collaborative Combat Aircraft ([CCA](#)) program with Australia and the United States. These programs have given Japan critical expertise in managing multinational projects and setting standards for sensitive knowledge and technology transfers.

Finally, Japan has a storied history of security cooperation with all three AUKUS partners. Japan been treaty allies with the US since 1952 and is home to several American military bases. Meanwhile, Japan has also agreed to "Reciprocal Access Agreements" with the [UK](#) and [Australia](#), lowering the barriers to shared military training and operations. The significant degree of military cooperation between all four states, as well as their shared commitment to Indo-Pacific deterrence, make Japan a reliable and secure addition to the AUKUS partnership.

### **Additional considerations**

Of course, adding Japan to AUKUS is not a decision to be made in a vacuum. Other allies are also under consideration to join the partnership, including Canada, New Zealand, and South Korea. Here, Japan offers several unique advantages. Compared to Canada and New Zealand, Japan has both a larger market and a more advanced innovation economy. South Korea, meanwhile, is more focused on the immediate threat of North Korea, rather than the broader Indo-Pacific, and thus risks diverting focus from countering China. As such, Japan offers both reliability and increased capabilities that other potential partners cannot match.

At the same time, adding Japan creates an opportunity to troubleshoot the expansion process while also paving the way for future "AUKUS-like" partnerships, as envisioned by Secretary Rubio. As technology becomes an increasingly salient aspect of modern warfare, it is only sensible that geopolitical and technological cooperation become aligned across partners. The procedures that have been developed during GCAP and similar programs can help inform the US' efforts to amend ITAR and produce a set of standards that allow disclosure of critical information to allies and partners.

Critics have argued that Pillar II expansion could [dilute](#) the focus of the partnership and [exacerbate](#) underlying issues. However, these concerns are unfounded. Japan is fully committed to Indo-Pacific deterrence, especially containing China. It's new [national security strategy](#) and [national defense strategy](#) have emphasized the Chinese threat to Taiwan. Moreover, it is already a leading defense partner for all three AUKUS states. Instead of weakening the focus of AUKUS, expanding pillar II to include Japan reinforces the partnership's commitment to Indo-Pacific deterrence.

### **Conclusion: A new vision**

Ultimately, expanding Pillar II to include Japan positions the partnership to better address the changing nature of geopolitical competition. As technological innovation becomes increasingly tied to warfare, traditional definitions of security cooperation are far too limiting. Rather than the additive nature of traditional alliances, Pillar II provides multiplicative potential, helping buttress both the quality and quantity of Indo-Pacific deterrence. At the same time, Pillar II is a risk, with close collaboration requiring mutual trust and security. On both these fronts, Japan is a natural partner. As a global leader in several of the critical technologies that AUKUS is attempting to leverage, as well as a decades-long partner of all three AUKUS countries, Japan provides both the scale and trust needed to help AUKUS achieve its mission of ensuring Indo-Pacific security.

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