

AUKUS ADVANCES: IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL AND GLOBAL SECURITY

By
Ghazala Yasmin Jalil
Research Fellow

Arms Control & Disarmament Centre, ISSI

Edited by
Malik Qasim Mustafa

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The US, Australia and UK are taking forward their cooperation under the AUKUS deal announced in September 2021. The AUKUS was meant to provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines and provide joint advanced military capabilities. In April 2022, the three countries announced that they will now expand that cooperation to include hypersonic missiles and counter-hypersonic measures, as well as electronic warfare capabilities and information sharing. It is important to assess what the deal means for regional and global security as well as for the non-proliferation regime. What are the dynamics of the AUKUS deal and what are the implications of their cooperation on hypersonic missiles?

AUKUS would help Australia acquire technology to build nuclear-powered submarines in collaboration with the US and UK. Australia is set to acquire up to eight nuclear submarines under AUKUS. This is contentious because nuclear material is a controlled substance produced mostly by nuclear weapon states and has never been provided to a country like Australia that does not have the technology. This has raised non-proliferation concerns over the dissemination of the technology. Australia is the first-ever state that is being given nuclear-powered submarine technology. AUKUS would also give Australia greater sharing of intelligence.

AUKUS is a response to a rising China in the region. Developing submarines and advanced military technologies is an effort to counter Chinese influence in the South China Sea and the Asia Pacific. Chinese Foreign Ministry had issued a strong statement when the pact was negotiated in September

2021 saying it will damage peace in the region, intensify arms races and damage international non-proliferation efforts.¹ This is likely to intensify hostility between China and Australia since AUKUS puts Canberra firmly in the anti-China military alliance.

The pact has also rocked France-Australia relations boat. Australia cancelled a US\$90 billion deal with a French company to build diesel-powered submarines. It caused a temporary diplomatic crisis between the two countries since Paris was kept in the dark about AUKUS. Subsequently, France recalled its ambassador to Australia. Australia has been trying to mend its relations with France. The newly elected Australian Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, will visit Paris to “reset” relations. Australia also announced a US\$584 million settlement with France’s Naval Group as compensation for scrapping the contract in favour of the AUKUS deal.²

The cooperation under AUKUS is two-pronged – one on building nuclear-powered submarines and the other to develop and provide joint advanced military capabilities. The US, UK and Australia have already laid out their next steps on defence technology cooperation under the AUKUS. They are deepening cooperation over advanced military technologies, including cyber, artificial intelligence (AI), quantum technology and undersea robotics. However, it is also significant that the three countries are all set to expand cooperation on the development of hypersonic missiles and counter-hypersonic technology, as well as electronic warfare capabilities and information sharing. Australian Defence Minister, Richard Marles, in his recent statements underscored the importance of military cooperation saying that “hi-tech” arms are more important than nuclear submarines.³

Nuclear-Powered Submarines

Implementation of the AUKUS partnership has now begun. It has two related lines of effort. On nuclear-powered submarines they have held several senior-level meetings. The Senior Officials Group comprised of National Security Advisors from the three countries met and held a virtual meeting in March 2022 to review AUKUS progress and provide direction to the trilateral partnership going forward. They also held multiple Joint Steering Group meetings for both lines of efforts under the AUKUS agreement. Seventeen trilateral working groups have been established which have met multiple times.

¹ “Aukus: China Denounces US-UK-Australia Pact as Irresponsible,” *BBC News*, September 16, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-58582573>.

² Tiffanie Turnbull, “Aukus: Australia’s new PM vows ‘reset’ with France after Submarine Row,” *BBC News*, June 24, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-61919761>.

³ *Ibid.*

Under AUKUS the three countries have taken important steps toward the implementation of the project on nuclear-powered submarines. This includes information exchange on naval nuclear propulsion trilaterally through the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement (ENNPPIA) signed on February 8, 2022.⁴ It also includes nuclear stewardship under which teams from the three countries visited multiple sites in Australia to baseline its nuclear stewardship, infrastructure, workforce and industrial capabilities and requirements. They are also working to ensure that Australia has a workforce with the necessary skills, training and qualifications to build, operate and sustain a conventionally-armed nuclear-powered submarine capability. Plans are also underway to establish a future submarine base on the east coast of Australia to support the basing and disposition of future nuclear-powered submarines. There is also work underway on nuclear Powered Submarine Construction Yard.⁵

They have also been in technical consultations with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on the non-proliferation aspects of the AUKUS deal. Deliberations are underway on safeguards of the nuclear material that will power the submarines. IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi has reiterated that Australia is a non-nuclear weapon state with firm non-proliferation commitments but also said safeguarding nuclear material used for naval propulsion is complex because IAEA inspectors are unable to check such material for long periods when a vessel is at sea.⁶ He also said that verification of the presence of the safeguarded material must be reconciled with the confidentiality of military operations. Mr Grossi was in Australia at the beginning of July 2022 and spoke with Australian leaders including the Prime Minister, Defence and Foreign Minister about nuclear non-proliferation challenges.

Advanced Military Capabilities

The AUKUS partnership is also paving the way for the acquisition of advanced military capabilities. There have already been progressing on eight different technologies. These include undersea capabilities. It includes Undersea Robotics Autonomous Systems (AURAS) project that seeks to work

⁴ Whitehouse, United States of America, *Fact Sheet: Implementation of the Australia – United Kingdom – United States Partnership (AUKUS)*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/04/05/fact-sheet-implementation-of-the-australia-united-kingdom-united-states-partnership-aukus/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Michael Amdi Madsen, “Australia Committed to Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Science, IAEA Chief Visit,” IAEA, July 9, 2022, <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/australia-committed-to-nuclear-non-proliferation-and-science-iaea-chief-visit>

on autonomous underwater vehicles where initial trials and capabilities are planned for 2023. It is envisaged as a significant force multiplier for Australian maritime forces.⁷

There is also cooperation on quantum technologies. The AUKUS Quantum Arrangement (AQuA) seeks to deliver generation-after-next quantum capabilities where trials and experimentation are envisaged over the next three years.⁸ It will focus on quantum technologies for positioning, navigation, and timing.

AI and autonomy are other areas of cooperation. Trilateral cooperation on AI and autonomy seek to work on future force capabilities, improving the speed and precision of decision-making processes to maintain a capability edge and defend against AI-enabled threats. Their cooperation in the advanced cyber domain is focused on strengthening cyber capabilities, including protecting critical communications and operations systems.⁹

Other areas of cooperation include electronic warfare where the three countries are working together to share the understanding of tools, techniques and technology, which would aid their forces to operate in contested and degraded environments. They are also working on defence innovation enterprises including ways to integrate commercial technologies to solve warfighting needs. Another area of cooperation is information sharing of sensitive nature in areas of advanced military capabilities.

Last but not least, the US, UK and Australia will work on the development of hypersonic and counter-hypersonic capabilities. Australia and the US have already been cooperating on the development of hypersonic missiles since 2020 under Southern Cross Integrated Flight Research Experiment (SCIFIRE).

Implications for Security

The provision of nuclear-powered submarines is a proliferation risk and sets a dangerous precedent.¹⁰ Australia is a non-nuclear weapon state and is a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as such, the nuclear-powered submarines (SSN) that the AUKUS promises to Australia are a proliferation concern. While the US, UK and Australia reiterated their commitment to non-proliferation, as Director General IAEA has stated it is complicated safeguarding nuclear-powered

⁷ Whitehouse, United States of America, *Fact Sheet: Implementation of the Australia*.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ For details see Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "AUKUS: A Diplomatic Crisis or a Pandora's Box of Proliferation?" Issue Brief, September 28, 2021, https://issi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Final_IB_Ghazala_Sep_28_2021.pdf

submarines. If Australia chooses, it can use the enriched uranium for weapons purposes. It is, thus, a proliferation risk. Also, it sets a dangerous precedent. If today nuclear-powered submarines are provided to Australia, in the future other countries may also be interested in acquiring them. Other major powers have nuclear submarine technology that may also share it with their security partners. It thus opens up Pandora's box of proliferation that is best left closed.

China is also vocalising its concerns over the issue of proliferation. There is a report just published by two Chinese think tanks that published a new report which declares the project is a grave risk to non-proliferation. It argued that the deal would set a "dangerous precedent" by allowing nuclear states to transfer weapons-grade nuclear materials to a non-nuclear state. It goes as far as claiming that Australia may be intent on developing nuclear weapons.¹¹

Furthermore, the trilateral partnership risks nuclear security, promotion of an arms race in nuclear submarines and missile technology proliferation. This will hurt regional and global security. Sharing of hypersonic missile technology also risks proliferation. Hypersonic missiles are super-fast, nuclear-capable missiles, Mach 5 or above that can strike their targets with precision, are highly manoeuvrable and can evade missile defences. Only a handful of countries possess or are developing the technology including the US, Russia, China, India and now Australia. Sharing the hypersonic technology will set in motion new arms races that will bring further instability and will make the world less secure. It also risks contravening the spirit of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) that prohibits the transfer of missiles and technology of 300 km range missiles and over. According to the report by a Chinese think tank, AUKUS will also involve the transfer of the latest version of the US Tomahawk cruise missile, with a range of 1,700 km, which exceeds the maximum limit under MTCR. This is ironic since the US, the UK and Australia are members and major advocates of the MTCR.

Conclusion

The AUKUS as a military alliance between the US and UK heightens tensions in China-Australia relations. The provision of nuclear-powered submarines goes against the spirit of the NPT and leaves a precedent that can open the way for proliferators in future. It undermines the already weakened nuclear non-proliferation regime. The proliferation of hypersonic missile technology would promote further arms races and bring more instability to regional and international security. Cooperation over advanced military technologies is another aspect of the AUKUS that is provocative and would

¹¹ Stephen Dziedzic, "Beijing warns AUKUS Submarine Project sets a 'dangerous precedent' and Threatens Non-proliferation," *ABC News*, July 21, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-07-21/beijing-warns-aukus-nuclear-submarine-nonproliferation-weapons/101257714>.

be seen as a threat by China and Russia. It promises to arm Australia with serious military technology and weaponry. This is likely to damage the global strategic balance and stability, push the world towards arms competition and yet create more tensions in the Asia Pacific region. It ultimately puts Asia-Pacific on the path to militarization, away from the goal of development and prosperity by countries in the region.