

AUKUS, A Game Changer?

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On September 15, 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden, U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, the leaders from three anglophone countries, announced the inception of a new trilateral strategic partnership, called AUKUS. At the heart of this trilateral cooperation lies a U.S. and U.K. decision to share their nuclear propulsion technology, the crown jewel of military technology, that will enable Canberra to deploy a fleet of at least eight nuclear-powered submarines in a decade or so. This decision has several ramifications that will render AUKUS a game changer in global politics. In this short essay, I will put forward several reasons why AUKUS could bring about a profound transformation of the current global security environment. However, I also argue that whether this new trilateral initiative will deliver on its promise and whether it will stay on course remains to be seen.

Why AUKUS Can Be Viewed as a Game Changer

When the AUKUS deal emerged to the surface, many viewed it as a new alliance¹ that may fundamentally reshape the global security landscape. In particular, *the Economist* portrayed the emergence of AUKUS as if we were witnessing “the tectonic plates of geopolitics shifting in front of [our] eyes,” an event comparable to U.S. President Richard Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, and the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989.² This might sound like an overstatement, but hold water for several reasons.

Most of all, not only does this represent a shift in a U.S. strategic priority from Europe to Asia, but it also stands for an enhanced U.S. commitment to counterbalance China. One might argue that such a policy shift is already reflected in the U.S. pivot to Asia, but this time the Biden administration took the risk of straining relations with France, a long-time ally in Europe,

¹ Although here I use the term “alliance,” and many mass media use the terms like a defense pact, an alliance agreement, and so on, it is important to note that AUKUS, *at present*, is not a formal alliance agreement, by which I mean a formal treaty signed by member states and in most cases required to be ratified by the legislative body of each member state. To be precise, as I described earlier, it is a trilateral security partnership, and in that sense, ‘an alliance’ is a misnomer. In an editorial that expresses *The Guardian*’s view on AUKUS, it notes: “While many herald Aukus as a momentous step, this is not a treaty but a statement of intent, with even the details of the submarine agreement 18 months away.” “The Guardian View on the AUKUS Defense Pact: Taking on China,” *The Guardian*, September 16, 2021. (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/sep/16/the-guardian-view-on-the-aukus-defence-pact-taking-on-china>) (searched date: September 23, 2021)

² “The Strategic Reverberations of the AUKUS Deal Will Be Big and Lasting,” *The Economist*, September 19, 2021.

by inducing Canberra to ditch the deal in which France committed to delivering 12 diesel-electric submarines to Australia by the 2030s.³ More importantly, the U.S. decision to share its nuclear propulsion technology with Australia displays a stronger commitment to Asia, especially to counter China; nobody anticipated such a U.S. decision and this was done only once in the U.S. history in 1958, when the U.S. transferred the same technology to the U.K. In fact, the weakened commitment to Europe and the enhanced commitment to Asia are the two sides of the same coin. The U.S. strategic focus away from Europe may cause a crack in the long-lasting NATO-centered security architecture in Europe, precipitating the creation of a EU-centered security framework.

In addition, the AUKUS deal, the centerpiece of which is to give away nuclear propulsion technology, highly likely to involve transferring highly enriched uranium (HEU) to Australia, can pose a substantial threat to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) system. Many observers, especially those who strongly uphold this deal, assert that the damage that it will inflict on the NPT regime will not be severe relative to the advantages it brings out. For example, Caitlin Talmadge, Associate Professor of Security Studies at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, contends that the benefits of the deal exceed the risk of nuclear proliferation caused by this exception. She argues that this deal, if anything, may help reduce the likelihood of nuclear proliferation because the fear of abandonment, due to a U.S. lack of power or will, amid a rising threat of China, that will spark nuclear armament in the region, can be ameliorated by this deal.⁴

However, many observers are also concerned that the AUKUS deal may allow would-be nuclear states to exploit the loophole in the IAEA safeguards agreement, which does not prohibit non-nuclear states from using “the nuclear material in a non-proscribed military activity,”⁵ such as building up nuclear reactors for submarines. Would-be nuclear states might divert accumulated enriched uranium, especially HEU, warranted as fuel for naval reactors, to manufacturing nuclear weapons.⁶ Many are worried that Iran might use this precedent to circumvent IAEA Safeguards. Reportedly, Iran informed IAEA in 2018 of its intention to develop a naval nuclear reactor to power a submarine. As such, Rafael Grossi, the head of IAEA, also expressed concerns about this deal, saying that this deal could be a precedent that other states might follow, and IAEA set up a taskforce to look into this deal and to prepare for

³ Steven Erlanger, “The Sharp U.S. Pivot to Asia Is Throwing Europe Off Balance,” *New York Times*, September 17, 2021. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/17/world/europe/biden-china-europe-submarine-deal.html>) (searched date: September 20, 2021)

⁴ Caitlin Talmadge, “Don’t Sink the Nuclear Submarine Deal: The Benefits of AUKUS Outweigh the Proliferation Risks,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 27, 2021.

⁵ International Atomic Energy Agency, *The Structure and Content of Agreements between the Agency and States Required in Connection with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, IAEA (June 1972) p. 5. In particular, see Article 14 (a).

⁶ James M. Acton, *Why the AUKUS Submarine Deal is Bad for Nonproliferation—and What to Do About It*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 21, 2021. (<https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/09/21/why-aukus-submarine-deal-is-bad-for-nonproliferation-and-what-to-do-about-it-pub-85399>) (searched date: October 2, 2021)

an arrangement with the AUKUS countries.⁷ Some even suspect that the negotiations held among three nations with secrecy might not have included experts on the NPT and probably this is part of the reasons why this loophole was not properly dealt with.⁸

Obviously, an undermined NPT regime is not what Washington intended or wanted. The Biden administration might have believed that this one more exception would be innocuous, as were the previous ones, but the repercussions of this deal could be much more serious than anticipated.

It Remains to Be Seen

In the previous section, I discussed briefly why AUKUS has a potential to be a game changer in global security, no matter how positive or negative the consequences are. However, it is worth pointing out that AUKUS is not the end result of trilateral cooperation but a starting point for an ambitious project among the three nations, meaning that the anticipated consequences described above have a substantial possibility to be adjusted over time. Even if the Biden administration is highly likely to maintain its key element of China policy, competition and confrontation, the details about how to transfer the nuclear propulsion technology are subject to change, especially due to concerns that it could undermine the current NPT regime.

Fortunately, the three countries had set up an 18-month consultation period prior to building up nuclear submarines to study further about how to make this happen without causing serious damage to the nonproliferation norm. Therefore, it would be right to say that many things have yet to be decided about the detailed processes. As mentioned earlier, grave concerns have been raised especially about the likelihood that newly launched Australian nuclear-powered submarines will be equipped with nuclear reactors using HEU for fuel. Because all the U.S. and the U.K. nuclear-powered submarines in service run on HEU, and this is the core element that produces all the key advantages that nuclear submarines can enjoy, such as endurance, power, stealth, speed, and so on, few would disagree that when the AUKUS deal was made, the three countries must have had HEU-powered submarines in mind. Rose Gottemoeller, the former NATO deputy secretary general and U.S. undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, reportedly, lamented that the AUKUS deal has “blown apart 60 years of U.S. policy to minimize the use of highly enriched uranium.”⁹ If the Biden foreign policy team takes this kind of concern seriously, they might attempt to change the course of this project. Interestingly, some observers suggested that the U.S. provide LEU-powered submarines,

⁷ Julian Borger, “IAEA Chief: AUKUS Could Set Precedent for Pursuit of Nuclear Submarines,” *The Guardian*, October 19, 2021. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/19/iaea-aukus-deal-nuclear-submarines>) (searched date: October 21, 2021)

⁸ Hidemitsu Kibe and Shogo Akagawa, “AUKUS Pact Delivers Blow to Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime,” *Nikkei Asia*, October 21, 2021. (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Comment/AUKUS-pact-delivers-blow-to-nuclear-nonproliferation-regime>) (searched date: October 21, 2021)

⁹ Rose Gottemoeller, “A Better Australia Sub Deal,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/21/opinion/letters/haiti-refugees-deportation.html#link-3161d0e4> (searched date: October 18, 2021)

instead of HEU, and include France, which is capable of building LEU-powered submarines, as a member of AUKUS.¹⁰ This initiative might serve a double purpose: it can mitigate the concern about the proliferation of nuclear material, especially, HEU, and help restore the strained relation with France, although this may in turn provoke anger from Canberra.

In this regard, domestic politics in Australia constitutes another reason why it remains to be seen how the AUKUS deal plays out. Despite the bipartisan support for the deal for now, things might change over time because it takes at least more than a decade from now on for a first nuclear-powered submarine to be commissioned. In the meantime, leadership changes in Australia and the China-Australia relationship could be another variable that might affect the course of this deal. **/End/**

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are the author's and do not reflect the views of IFES.

¹⁰ Adam Mount and Van Jackson, "Biden, You Should Be Aware That Your Submarine Deal Has Costs," *New York Times*, September 30, 2021. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/30/opinion/aukus-china-us-australia-competition.html>)(searched date: October 8, 2021)