

# POLICY BRIEF

## AUKUS, Japan and the Indo-Pacific: Strategic rationales and challenges

The announcement of AUKUS, a new security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, on 15 September 2021 caused shockwaves around the world.<sup>1</sup> France's fury was understandable as the AUKUS deal meant the cancellation of a 2016 submarine deal between Paris and Canberra. The negotiations were kept strictly secret until the very end.

The three countries are now starting an 18-month period of detailing the plan to build "at least 8" nuclear submarines for the Royal Australian Navy using American and British technology.<sup>2</sup> Answers to questions such as when the first boat will become operational and how much the whole project will cost are not known yet. It is commonly estimated that the submarines will not be ready until around 2040, which effectively suggests that this deal is going to be a long-term commitment.

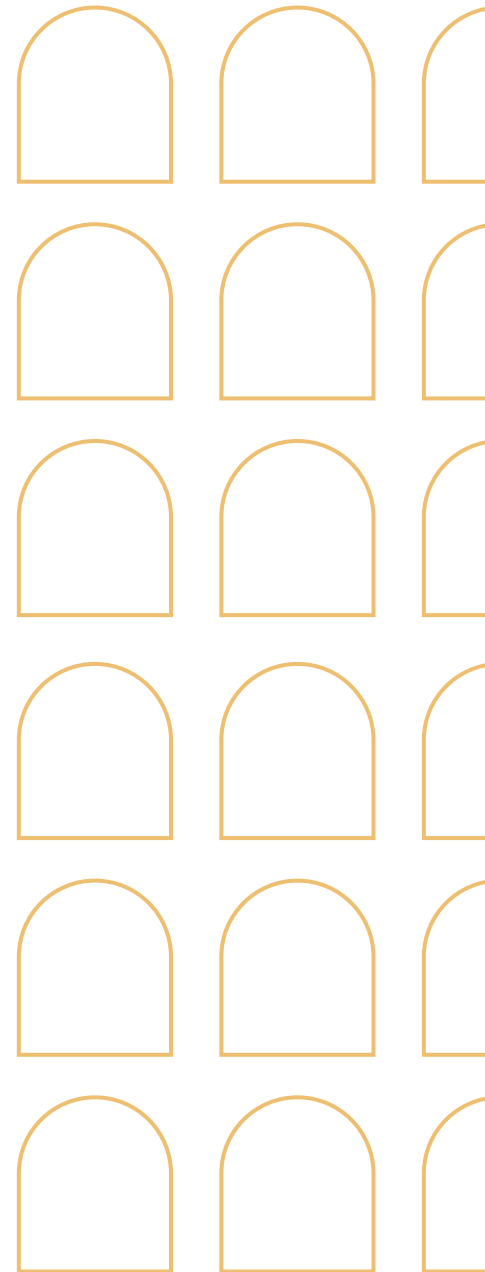
This policy brief (1) examines the strategic rationale for each of the three countries involved; (2) explores the implications of AUKUS for the future of European security engagement and the regional order in the Indo-Pacific; and (3) examines in detail Tokyo's reaction to the AUKUS agreement as it is hardly straightforward and AUKUS raises some difficult questions for Japan. This cannot be a comprehensive assessment of AUKUS but what follows is an initial attempt to analyse the new framework and just a snapshot of what has emerged in the month following the announcement of the deal (September-October 2021), which is of limited nature.

1 White House, "Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS," 15 September 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus/>

2 Australian Government, "Nuclear-powered Submarines," Factsheet, September 2021, <https://www1.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-09/NuclearPoweredSubmarine-Factsheet.pdf>.

### Author

Michito Tsuruoka, Associate Professor at Keio University.



**EU-Asia project**

Issue 2021/51

November 2021

## Making sense of AUKUS

In spite of all the diplomatic debacles involving the French and the sense of unease expressed in some quarters in southeast Asia, AUKUS seems to make strategic sense to all three participants and it is going to enhance the regional deterrence posture vis-à-vis China.

### Australia

For Australia, it is about strengthening its military capability to address China's growing maritime activities in the South China Sea and the western Pacific more generally. Only with nuclear-powered submarines will Australia be able to conduct sustained operations in the South China Sea.<sup>3</sup> When the submarine deal with France was signed in 2016, Canberra's defence policy was not yet focused on China and many believed that the new Australian submarines would be deployed first and foremost in the Indian Ocean, which the country's existing submarine base, HMAS Stirling, faces. The overall relations between Australia and China were then far better than today. Moreover, the Malcolm Turnbull government at the time seemed to put more emphasis on creating jobs and securing technology transfer through the submarine project than improving Australia's military capability.<sup>4</sup> As a result of a growing realisation in Australia about China's military threats and challenges, Canberra has now decided to pursue the best possible capability – and the answer was nuclear-powered submarines.

Australia is reported to have first approached the UK about the possibility of sharing nuclear submarine technology in March 2021 and the UK talked to

the US regarding Australia's idea.<sup>5</sup> However, it was uncertain whether the US would accept the idea as nuclear submarine technology is highly sensitive and the US has only shared it with the UK, back in a 1958 US-UK agreement.<sup>6</sup>

One of the contentious issues regarding AUKUS from Australia's point of view concerns the degree of sovereignty the country will have to cede as there will be substantial black box in the submarines.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the operation of the Australian boats is supposed to be highly integrated with that of the US ones. Prime Minister Scott Morrison talks about a "forever partnership."<sup>8</sup> He also describes this as "the single greatest initiative to achieve these goals [the stability and security of our region] since the ANZUS alliance."<sup>9</sup> This is no doubt political rhetoric aimed at highlighting the achievement of his government. However, experts who support the AUKUS agreement instead emphasise that it is in line with what the Australian government has been pursuing in recent years, as is exemplified by the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper and the 2020 Defence Strategic Update.<sup>10</sup> They argue that AUKUS does not represent a new commitment, for example, to intervene in a Taiwan contingency in support of the Americans and therefore does not undermine Australia's sovereignty.<sup>11</sup>

Looking at the broader picture, however, it can be said that if one argues that AUKUS is not a new alliance per se it is because the three countries have long been allies, or more precisely closer than normal allies, something Prime Minister Boris Johnson of Britain talks of as "kindred" nations.<sup>12</sup> The US, the UK and Australia form the inner core of the already quite exclusive intelligence club called 'Five

3 Jim Thomas, Zack Cooper and Iskander Rehman, Gateway to the Indo-Pacific: Australian Defense Strategy and the Future of the Australia-U.S. Alliance, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA), November 2013, pp. 30-33. <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/gateway-to-the-indo-pacific-australian-defense-strategy-and-the-future-of-t/publication/1>

4 Euan Graham, "Australia's well-kept nuclear-submarine secret," Analysis, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 17 September 2021. <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/09/australia-submarines>

5 "Theresa May questions whether Aukus pact could lead to war over Taiwan," The Guardian, 16 September 2021. [https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/sep/16/theresa-may-aukus-pact-war-uk-china-taiwan?fbclid=IwAR2\\_fZb5yeBXU1eIRbWmZ2D5Mzn9Zo6\\_pexcwFA77Yr-Slp6YkqHQaclSDdg](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/sep/16/theresa-may-aukus-pact-war-uk-china-taiwan?fbclid=IwAR2_fZb5yeBXU1eIRbWmZ2D5Mzn9Zo6_pexcwFA77Yr-Slp6YkqHQaclSDdg)

6 "Like a scene from *le Carré*: how the nuclear submarine pact was No 10's biggest secret," The Times, 17 September 2021. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/like-a-scene-from-le-carre-how-the-nuclear-submarine-pact-was-no10s-biggest-secret-dj7z5f8bh>

7 Malcolm Turnbull, "Trust is at the heart of Australia's influence," War on the Rocks, 4 October 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/10/trust-is-at-the-heart-of-australias-influence/>.

8 Prime Minister of Australia, "Press Conference," Canberra, 16 September 2021. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/press-conference-canberra-act-24>

9 Ibid.

10 Ashley Townshend, "Far from breaking with the past, AUKUS advances Australia's commitment to collective defence," The Strategist, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), 24 September 2021. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/far-from-breaking-with-the-past-aukus-advances-australias-commitment-to-collective-defence/>

11 Stephen Fruehling, "Does the AUKUS submarine deal compromise Australia's sovereignty?" The Strategist, ASPI, 1 October 2021. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/does-the-aukus-submarine-deal-compromise-australias-sovereignty/>

12 White House, "Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS," 15 September 2021.

Eyes.’ President Joe Biden argues that “Our nations and our brave fighting forces have stood shoulder-to-shoulder for literally more than 100 years.”<sup>13</sup> Only on this basis is AUKUS now formed. They did not have to build a new alliance simply because they had long been more than just allies. Although one hears a lot of talk about ‘fear of entrapment’ in academic discussion in Australia, the reality is that the country participated in literally all the UK’s major wars until the 1950s and those of the US thereafter, including in Afghanistan and Iraq in recent years. In short, the history of fighting together among the three special allies has made AUKUS possible. It is not that AUKUS will make the three allies special.

## The United States

Seen from the US, the country seems to have a clear strategic motivation to let Australia operate nuclear submarines in the Indo-Pacific region, not least the South China Sea, as the number of available US submarines is limited. Having Australians operating alongside the US will strengthen the military posture of the US vis-à-vis China in the western Pacific. Washington must have calculated that the benefit of this outweighs any potential risks and the cost of sharing tightly held nuclear submarine secrets with other countries, including concerns about a possible negative impact on the international non-proliferation regime.

A senior official in the Biden administration in a background briefing stated “I just want to underscore that this is a fundamental decision – fundamental – that binds decisively Australia to the United States and Great Britain for generations. This is the biggest strategic step that Australia has taken in generations.”<sup>14</sup> Alexander Neill neatly summarises Washington’s intentions as a “real effort to enhance allies’ capabilities and exploit as much as possible

new relationships to increase the reach for the US” and AUKUS is about “integrating your friends and allies into your battlespace and posing a deterrence to the likes of China through force multiplication.”<sup>15</sup> The US seems to be determined to use Australia as part of its own effort to confront China.

Another military advantage that AUKUS brings to the US’s posture and operations in the region comes from the fact that the US submarines will be able to use a base in Australia – the current RAN Stirling base near Perth or a new facility near Darwin, which is much closer to the South China Sea – in the future. In the context of dispersing assets in the region in view of vulnerability against China, securing a base from which the US could operate in the region, in addition to Guam and Japan, is something the US military has wanted. Simply put, Australia is “in a convenient location.”<sup>16</sup>

## The United Kingdom

AUKUS for London can be said to have come with perfect timing. First, it is fully in line with Britain’s “tilt to the Indo-Pacific,” announced in the Integrated Review in March 2021 and reinforces ‘global Britain’ because AUKUS binds the UK in the security of the Indo-Pacific for generations to come. Assuming that it is London’s decision to commit itself more to the security of the Indo-Pacific region for generations to come, AUKUS will be one of the most significant and substantial pillars of this commitment. The UK’s permanent engagement in the region is also something both Canberra and Washington would like to see.<sup>17</sup> It is reported that UK submarines will be using an Australian base in the future, which will help extend the UK’s submarine operation in the region.<sup>18</sup>

Second, its involvement in Australia’s nuclear submarine programme will give Britain technological

---

13 White House, “Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS,” 15 September 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/09/15/remarks-by-president-biden-prime-minister-morrison-of-australia-and-prime-minister-johnson-of-the-united-kingdom-announcing-the-creation-of-aukus/>

14 White House, “Background Press Call on AUKUS,” 15 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/09/15/background-press-call-on-aukus/>.

15 Quoted in “US military extends reach into China’s backyard with Australia security pact,” Financial Times, 18 September 2021, [https://www.ft.com/content/540d9b20-123f-480d-9022-52d5c1f2361d?fbclid=IwAR25Enp9DSvzLF9HdNff-YOinwEO\\_ptW30MLJHcLu\\_NQf86lq2wbtyV-4VUI](https://www.ft.com/content/540d9b20-123f-480d-9022-52d5c1f2361d?fbclid=IwAR25Enp9DSvzLF9HdNff-YOinwEO_ptW30MLJHcLu_NQf86lq2wbtyV-4VUI).

16 Quoted in *ibid.* See also “With Australia card, the US has a stronger hand,” The Straits Times, 11 October 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/with-australia-card-the-us-has-a-stronger-hand>.

17 “Aukus deal ‘ties UK into Indo-Pacific and sends message to China,’” The Guardian, 21 September 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/sep/21/aukus-deal-ties-uk-into-indo-pacific-and-sends-message-to-china>.

18 “Britain’s nuclear submarines to use Australia as base for Indo-Pacific presence,” The Times, 20 September 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/britains-nuclear-submarines-to-use-australia-as-base-for-indo-pacific-presence-rw6mz0p03#:~:text=Britain's%20nuclear%20powered%20submarines%20are,under%20plans%20discussed%20by%20ministers>.

and industrial benefits as well.<sup>19</sup> The UK will soon start designing a new fleet of nuclear attack submarines as successors to the Astute class, and participation in the Australian project will help the UK's own project, not least if the Australian submarines turn out to be based on the Astute class rather than the US attack submarines, the Virginia class. The UK model is smaller and therefore cheaper than the US equivalent and it is not clear whether the US is ready to share the Virginia class as a package.

Therefore, the fact that the UK is in the new framework should not be taken as diplomatic cover or that it is just a middleman between Australia and the US. The UK is likely to play a substantial role in the designing and building of Australia's submarine fleet.

## AUKUS in the Indo-Pacific

How AUKUS will influence the emerging regional order in the Indo-Pacific depends on whether it remains essentially a nuclear submarine programme or it expands its areas of cooperation as stipulated in the 15 September announcement, namely 'deeper integration' of defence and security-related technologies such as cyber, AI (artificial intelligence), quantum technologies and additional undersea capabilities.<sup>20</sup> While Australia has been engaged in defence R&D in these areas, the country is not particularly known as a world technological hub. Thinking beyond nuclear submarines, it makes more sense to involve Japan, India and other advanced economies with technological prowess. However, as long as AUKUS remains a nuclear submarine club, cooperation with other partners cannot be envisaged as nuclear submarine technology inevitably needs to be tightly controlled. This arguably constitutes the biggest structural contradiction of AUKUS.

Meanwhile, AUKUS is already seen as another 'Anglo-Saxon grouping' or 'Caucasian club,' particular-

ly in Asia.<sup>21</sup> It is perhaps undeniable that AUKUS is intentionally exclusive. In addition to the fact that nuclear submarine technology is inherently sensitive, Admiral Tony Radakin, the First Sea Lord, who has been nominated to be Chief of the UK Defence Staff, stated the following.

Being three like-minded nations [The UK, the US and Australia] gives you an agility and a nimbleness to come together quite quickly and to plan to potentially do quite big things. Because you're less constrained with having to bring a whole host of other nations along with you and long deliberations and so on that inevitably go with the more complex it gets.<sup>22</sup>

This is a remarkably honest admission about the nature of AUKUS and the thinking behind it in the top echelons of the UK military.

AUKUS can also be located in the context of the 'Anglosphere.'<sup>23</sup> Former Australian senior official Alan Gyngell argues that "Australia sent a problematic message to the region that the 'Anglosphere is back'." He went on to say that "It reinforces perspectives that Australia is not really a legitimate part of the region [Asia], but a junior partner in a three-way partnership between English-speaking countries."<sup>24</sup> Such an image can hardly be positive in the region. In a similar vein, Michael Fullilove argues that the "Anglosphere is necessary for Australia, but far from sufficient."<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that these critical assessments of the image of AUKUS are already heard in Australia. However, as long as it is about nuclear submarines, the exclusive nature of the grouping is very difficult to change.

France's fierce reaction can be understood in this context, because it in large part stems from the fact that it was excluded from the new club.<sup>26</sup> Behind this lies Paris's pride that it is France that has been the European country most engaged in the Indo-Pacific

19 Sidharth Kaushal, "What Does the AUKUS Deal Provide its Participants in Strategic Terms?" Commentary, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), 21 September 2021, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/what-does-aukus-deal-provide-its-participants-strategic-terms/>.

20 "Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS."

21 Brad Glosserman, "A path-breaking deal to bolster Indo-Pacific security," Japan Times, 21 September 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/09/21/commentary/world-commentary/aukus-indo-pacific-security/>.

22 "Interview: U.K. Royal Navy's First Sea Lord Talks AUKUS, British Carriers in the Pacific," USNI News, 7 October 2021. <https://news.usni.org/2021/10/07/interview-u-k-royal-navys-first-sea-lord-talks-aukus-british-carriers-in-the-pacific>

23 Andrew Roberts, "It's Time to Revive the Anglosphere," The Wall Street Journal, 8 August 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/its-time-to-revive-the-anglosphere-11596859260>.

24 Quoted in "Morrison in defence mode as AUKUS fallout goes global," The Sydney Morning Herald, 25 September 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/morrison-in-defence-mode-as-aukus-fallout-goes-global-20210924-p58ui2.html>.

25 Ibid.

26 See, for example, Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (France), "Joint communiqué issued by Jean-Yves Le Drian and Florence Parly," 16 September 2021, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/australia/news/article/joint-communique-issued-by-jean-yves-le-drian-and-florence-parly-16-sept-2021>.



region and that it is ‘the oldest ally’ of the US, which led French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian to state that AUKUS constituted “unacceptable behaviour between allies.”<sup>27</sup> It is unclear whether Paris was prepared to share its nuclear submarine technology with Australia (and for that matter with the UK and the US) given that France has never transferred the technology to other countries. Bruno Tertrais and Michel Duclos argue that “France must bid adieu to its hopes of being in the ‘Anglosphere’,” including the Five Eyes alliance, and that “It would be unreasonable, if at all desirable, to apply for membership in AUKUS – or to expect to be asked to do so.”<sup>28</sup> What this probably suggests is that at least some in France have been in the belief that the country deserves special treatment or full membership of the Anglosphere given its wide-ranging efforts in intelligence and defence in spite of all the political rhetoric about distancing itself from the US.

Quite ironically, however, it can also be argued that as long as AUKUS remains focused exclusively or predominantly on nuclear submarines the roles of other frameworks, organisations and countries will not be greatly undermined. There seems to be an emerging division of labour between AUKUS and the Quad, a grouping bringing together the US, Japan, Australia and India, with the former concerning high-end defence technology cooperation and the latter concerning soft security or economic security issues. This makes AUKUS a ‘bad cop’ and the Quad a ‘good cop.’

As the Indo-Pacific region is vast and multifaceted, challenges need to be addressed in multiple ways and different actors have different roles to play. This is why although France was excluded from AUKUS it hardly means that it has lost its role in the region.<sup>29</sup> The same can be said of the European Union (EU), which released its Indo-Pacific strategy literally the day following the AUKUS announcement.<sup>30</sup> Although the new strategy was completely

overshadowed by AUKUS, the EU’s main economic security agenda – diversifying global value chains – and more emphasis on working with like-minded countries such as Japan, India and South Korea will remain valid and will not be directly affected by AUKUS.

## Anatomising Tokyo’s response

Already under Yoshihide Suga’s government, which stepped down a few weeks after the AUKUS announcement, Tokyo ‘welcomed’ the new initiative as it would enhance cooperation between the three countries and strengthen their engagement in security in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>31</sup> It is noteworthy that Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi did not directly refer to the nuclear submarine programme. Therefore, Tokyo’s expression of welcome can be seen as qualified, showing some sense of unease or ambivalence.<sup>32</sup>

That said, the fact that there will be more nuclear-powered submarines on the American side vis-à-vis China is inherently a good thing for Japan in the light of the shifting balance of power in the region caused by China’s rapid military build-up. Furthermore, defence cooperation between Japan and Australia has substantially developed over the past decade, which constitutes yet another reason why Tokyo welcomes Australia’s enhanced commitment to security in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the South China Sea and potentially in the East China Sea as well.

However, at the same time, the fact that Australia will operate nuclear submarines raises a few challenges for Tokyo. First, it has already ignited public debates as to whether Japan should also acquire nuclear submarines. Candidates in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership election in September 2021 were asked about this issue. Despite the obvious difference between operating nu-

27 Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (France), “Statement by Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs,” 17 September 2021, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/australia/news/article/statement-by-jean-yves-le-drian-minister-for-europe-and-foreign-affairs-17-sept>.

28 Bruno Tertrais and Michel Duclos, “After AUKUS: How Could France Reboot Its Indo-Pacific Strategy?” Institut Montaigne, 4 October 2021, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/after-aukus-how-could-france-reboot-its-indo-pacific-strategy>.

29 Antoine Bondaz, “There’s a silver lining for France in the US-Australia submarine deal,” Politico.eu, 17 September 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/silver-lining-for-france-in-us-australia-submarine-deal/>.

30 Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, “The EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,” JOIN(2021) 24 final, Brussels, 16 September 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_indo\\_pacific\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_indo_pacific_en.pdf).

31 MOFA, “Press Conference by Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu,” 21 September 2021, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken25e\\_000038.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken25e_000038.html); MOFA, “Japan-UK Foreign Ministers’ Telephone Talk,” 17 September 2021, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e\\_003045.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_003045.html).

32 Sadamasa Oue, “AUKUS has a significant part to play in the ‘new Cold War’ against China,” The Japan Times, 2 November 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/11/02/commentary/world-commentary/aukus-china-cold-war/>; Michito Tsuruoka, “AUKUS has outlined its potential, but has also left a sour taste,” The Japan Times, 4 November 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2021/11/04/commentary/world-commentary/aukus-japan-future/>.

clear-powered submarines and possessing nuclear weapons, the issue of nuclear propulsion for military vessels has always been contentious in Japan and it is highly unlikely that the government will be able to forge a consensus in favour of acquiring nuclear-powered submarines for the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF). Moreover, whether nuclear submarines are needed given the underwater geography in the vicinity of Japan is unclear at best. The East China Sea, for example, is shallow and not a perfect environment for larger nuclear submarines to operate in.

Second, even if the Japanese government decides to acquire nuclear submarines, it is unclear how the US would react. In announcing AUKUS, the Biden administration emphasised that it was a “one-off,” because “this technology is extremely sensitive” and it was an “exception to our policy in many respects.”<sup>33</sup> It is an open secret that South Korea is interested in nuclear submarines, but Washington has never supported the idea.<sup>34</sup> A British defence source has been quoted as saying “Once you give that information you cannot get it back. You can only give it to the nations that you will be friends with forever.”<sup>35</sup> It is also no coincidence that the AUKUS countries are a core group in the already exclusive ‘Five Eyes’ intelligence network, as was discussed above. The Japanese continue to wonder whether Japan is seen as a ‘forever friend’ by the Americans or by the other AUKUS countries.

Yuki Tatsumi is blunt in saying that “Japan, at the end of the day, has not reached a level of depth in its alliance relationship with the U.S. that is on par with the U.K. and Australia alliance.”<sup>36</sup> The same can be said of the possibility of Japan’s joining the Five Eyes network.<sup>37</sup> With the exception of a small number of enthusiasts who argue in favour of joining the exclusive Anglosphere, it appears that there is a fairly accepted assumption in Japan, including among many in the foreign and security policy community, that ‘it is other people’s business, not

ours.’ Arguably, this represents an interesting gap between the Japanese and the French.

Third, another challenge concerns the level of operational integration with the US. While the operational details about Australia’s nuclear submarine fleet are to be determined in the coming years, it is very likely that Australia will be highly integrated with US operations in the region, perhaps at a level which Tokyo cannot reach due to constitutional, legal and domestic political constraints.

Overall, the fact that Australia will become a sort of ‘special ally’ of the US in the Indo-Pacific region poses some fundamental questions about the Japan-US alliance, which Tokyo has long proudly considered *primus inter pares* in various respects. This position could potentially be challenged by an Australia armed with nuclear-powered submarines. It can be argued that the role of Japan in submarine operations will decline, at least in relative terms. Given that Australia’s level of integration with the US military has long been much deeper than Japan’s in many areas – apart from the relative political significance of the respective alliances – AUKUS will not change the overall picture. However, nuclear submarines could become a more visible symbol of this. Therefore, in the wake of the launch of AUKUS, Tokyo will have to reconsider the way in which its Self-Defense Forces operate with the US, not least regarding the level of integration or jointness between the two militaries.

Another source of unease at least in some quarters in Tokyo concerns the potential implications of AUKUS’ for the future of nuclear non-proliferation in the region and beyond. While Australia will not have access to nuclear weapons, the fact is that nuclear submarines like those of the US and the UK use weapon-grade highly enriched uranium (HEU) outside the International Atomic Energy Agency’s safeguards.<sup>38</sup> This could represent a risky precedent and lower ‘psychological barriers’ to possess-

33 “Background Press Call on AUKUS.” See also White House, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki,” 22 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/09/22/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-september-22-2021/>.

34 Seoc Woo Kim, Jungmin Kang and Frank von Hippel, “South Korea’s risky quest to build nuclear-powered attack submarines,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 18 November 2020, <https://thebulletin.org/2020/11/south-koreas-risky-quest-to-build-nuclear-powered-attack-submarines/>.

35 “Like a scene from *le Carré*.”

36 Yuki Tatsumi, “AUKUS: Lessons for Japan’s Defense Industry,” *The Diplomat*, 28 September 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/aucus-lessons-for-japans-defense-industry/>.

37 Michito Tsuruoka, “Japan and the Five Eyes: A Reality Check,” *Nippon.com*, 24 December 2020, <https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00654/>.

38 James Acton, “Why the AUKUS Submarine Deal Is Bad for Nonproliferation – And What to Do About It,” *Commentary*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 September 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/09/21/why-aucus-submarine-deal-is-bad-for-nonproliferation-and-what-to-do-about-it-pub-85399>.

ing and transferring nuclear submarines.<sup>39</sup> Fumio Kishida, Japan's new Prime Minister since October 2021, is known to be an enthusiastic proponent of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. He published a book entitled *Toward a World without Nuclear Weapons* in 2020.<sup>40</sup> During the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership contest immediately after the announcement of AUKUS, Kishida was much more cautious than some other candidates about the idea of Japan possessing nuclear submarines.<sup>41</sup> Although it is too early to say what will happen under the Kishida government, it looks highly unlikely that Japan will seek to get involved in AUKUS in a direct manner.

## Conclusions

The way that AUKUS was negotiated and announced took many people, including government officials and experts, by surprise. However, the aims of the three countries participating in the new security partnership are fairly clear and make strategic sense, as has been argued above. Restoring relations with Paris is likely to take some time, if not forever, and the prospect of Australia's increasing role as a special ally of the US will present challenges to Tokyo. Nevertheless, strengthening the regional deterrence posture vis-à-vis China and facilitating the continuation of US's security commitment in the region are the biggest benefits for those who share fundamental values and interests with the United States, including France.

However, the US, the UK and Australia are only in the very initial stage of the submarine programme. Success is not guaranteed.<sup>42</sup> Even if it turns out to be successful, it will take a couple of decades for the new submarines to be fully operational in the western Pacific, including the South China Sea. This is just the start of what promises to be a long journey.

---

39 Nobumasa Akiyama, "AUKUS as a catalyst for more strategy for Japan," The Korea Times, 13 October 2021, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2021/10/197\\_316811.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2021/10/197_316811.html).

40 Fumio Kishida, *Kakuheiki no nai sekai e* [Toward a World without Nuclear Weapons], Tokyo, Nikkei BP, 2020.

41 "Nuclear submarine for Japan? Kono says yes, Kishida says no," Nikkei Asia, 26 September 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Nuclear-submarine-for-Japan-Kono-says-yes-Kishida-says-no>.

42 Erik Sand, "Don't count your submarines until they're built," War on the Rocks, 29 September 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/dont-count-your-submarines-before-theyre-built/>.

## The Global Governance Programme

*The Global Governance Programme (GGP) is research turned into action. It provides a European setting to conduct research at the highest level and promote synergies between the worlds of research and policy-making, to generate ideas and identify creative innovative solutions to global challenges. The Programme is part of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies of the European University Institute, a world-renowned academic institution. It receives financial support from the European Commission through the European Union budget. Complete information on our activities can be found online at: [globalgovernanceprogramme.eui.eu](http://globalgovernanceprogramme.eui.eu)*

## EU-Asia Project

*The EU-Asia project is a research and educational initiative within the Global Governance Programme. It is designed to contribute to mutual understanding and exchange between Asia and Europe at a time of unprecedented change in international politics and global governance. The project also aims at an ambitious academic programme on EU and Asia, with a particular focus on Japan.*

## Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

*The Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS), created in 1992 and directed by Professor Brigid Laffan, aims to develop inter-disciplinary and comparative research on the major issues facing the process of European integration, European societies and Europe's place in 21<sup>st</sup> century global politics. The Centre is home to a large post-doctoral programme and hosts major research programmes, projects and data sets, in addition to a range of working groups and ad hoc initiatives. The research agenda is organised around a set of core themes and is continuously evolving, reflecting the changing agenda of European integration, the expanding membership of the European Union, developments in Europe's neighbourhood and the wider world.*

[www.eui/rsc](http://www.eui/rsc)

© European University Institute, 2021  
Editorial matter and selection © Michito Tsuruoka, 2021

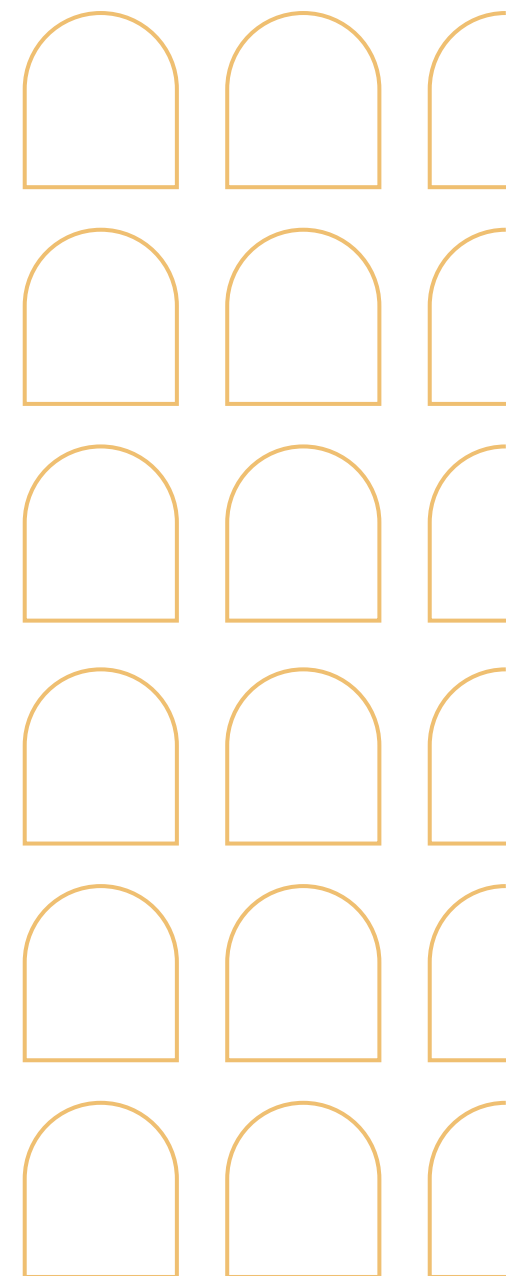
This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 \(CC-BY 4.0\) International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which governs the terms of access and reuse for this work. If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the series and number, the year and the publisher.

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute.

Published by  
European University Institute (EUI)  
Via dei Roccettini 9, I-50014  
San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)  
Italy



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union



doi:10.2870/175059  
ISBN:978-92-9466-107-4  
ISSN:2467-4540  
QM-AX-21-051-EN-N