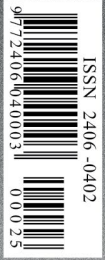


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THE AGE OF MINILATERALISM



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THE AUKUS ANVIL

PROMISE AND PERIL

Nick Childs

THE ‘enhanced trilateral security partnership’ between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, known as AUKUS, emerged in September 2021. Since then, it has acquired almost mythical status. This is due mainly to the strategic loft and immense national ambition of the initiative: it aims to secure for the Royal Australian Navy a capability in submarines with nuclear propulsion—a technology shrouded in secrecy that only six countries now possess—and thereby to elevate and consolidate allied power. AUKUS has acquired the label ‘too big to fail,’ at least according to Australia’s Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles. That remains to be seen. For all three countries there are serious questions about whether defense-industrial capacities and economic growth will be sufficient, and political commitment durable enough, to sustain the project. Given the enterprise’s large scale, long span and the potential strategic rewards and risks, it will be the anvil on which a key set of relationships, capabilities and

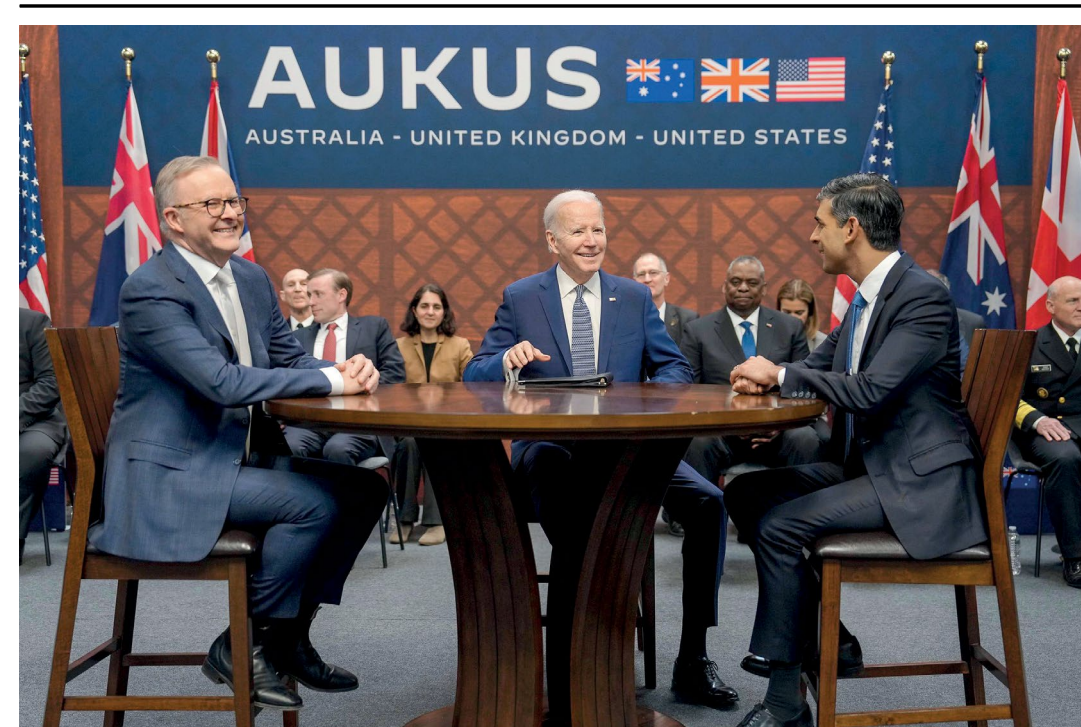
effects will either be forged or broken. For all the commitments proclaimed, work undertaken, and decisions unveiled so far, the formidable challenges of fulfilling the arrangement also raise the question of what the strategic fallout will be if it is not fulfilled.

THE PROMISE

It is difficult to overestimate the potential significance of this tripartite submarine undertaking. While the initial AUKUS announcements studiously avoided references to China, that nation’s growing challenge to the West was clearly the motivating force behind it. AUKUS is perhaps the most important multilateral initiative so far that is intended to readjust a maritime balance in the Pacific that seemed to be inexorably shifting in China’s favor.

If things go according to plan, Australia will join an elite fraternity of like-minded nations operating nuclear-powered submarines; the submarine production capacity of the three partners

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AUKUS leaders meet in San Diego in 2023

will significantly increase; and, by the middle of the century, about a dozen extra such submarines could be added to the combined inventories of the AUKUS navies. The result will be ‘a new global and interoperable nuclear-powered submarine capability,’ in the words of the UK Minister for the Indo-Pacific Anne-Marie Trevelyan. The debate will continue over whether this project reinforces deterrence or raises tensions; whether nuclear-powered submarines are the right strategic choice for Australia; whether they risk obsolescence as undersea-surveillance technologies improve; and whether they tie Canberra into far greater strategic dependence

on the United States. For now, though, the nuclear-powered-submarine option looks like the most potent, survivable, and operationally independent means of establishing a long-range power-projection capability for Australia.

From the outset, AUKUS also contemplated cooperation on other key defense capabilities, initially identified as cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and undersea-warfare technologies. To this second pillar hypersonic and counter-hypersonic capabilities, electronic warfare, innovation, and information-sharing have been added. Some have argued

that the second pillar could become at least as significant as the first, but that will depend on nurturing further cooperation in these areas, possibly including with other partners as well. Submarines are the main focus here.

Notwithstanding the steadily reiterated message that the project will necessarily span decades and even generations, the unveiling itself was something of a sea-change moment, particularly for Australia. Canberra, not Washington, initiated AUKUS. It was also an inflection point for the United States, which agreed only for the second time to share its nuclear-submarine propulsion technology, having done so with the UK in 1958. It also symbolized the seismic evolution under way in the United States' defense and security posture in the region and globally—in particular the dawning realization of the need to embrace allies and partners more closely and rely on their capabilities to sustain credible deterrence. The UK, meanwhile, functioned as a linchpin in bringing the tripartite partnership together after the Royal Australian Navy chief of navy had secretly broached the idea with his Royal Navy counterpart. Should it pan

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out, AUKUS could validate and reinforce the UK's revived and enhanced engagement in the Pacific theater, and therefore its position as a medium power with a global perspective and reach. It would also shore up the UK's future in the nuclear-submarine business and offer the broader prospect of a bonanza

in high-tech jobs and manufacturing.

THE RUN-UP

The Royal Australian Navy had toyed with the ambition of procuring nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) in the past. Given the tyrannies of distance in patrolling the waters of potential strategic interest to Australia, SSNs' ability to remain submerged and undetected, transit underwater at high speed for practically unlimited periods, and support a powerful range of systems and weapons always offered significant operational advantages over conventionally powered attack submarines (SSKs). Until recently, however, those assets had never seemed quite enough to justify the potential costs and complexity of procurement, or the political challenge of overcoming a national aversion to crossing the political-military threshold of nuclear propulsion.

The strategic horizons, however, were darkening significantly when Canberra decided in April 2016 to replace its flotilla of six ageing *Collins* class conventional attack subs. It was clear that Australia's subsurface force needed boosting, and the Department of Defence had decided to double hull numbers to 12. But the choice was still for a conventional vessel of French design dubbed the *Attack* class. The design chosen, described as 'regionally superior,' was in effect a conventionally powered version of the latest French nuclear-attack-submarine design. The Australian government's 2020 Defence Strategic Update foretold a rapidly deteriorating strategic environment. A more hostile future looked set to arrive early, calling into question whether the *Attack* class would meet requirements of survivability and lethality by the time the first boats started entering service, projected by then to be in the 2030s.

Warning signs also appeared that the French submarine deal was not in the best of health, with growing expressions of concern about delays, cost escalations

and the level of workshare for Australia: the Australian government was losing confidence in France's ability to deliver. Alliance management was another matter. Operational considerations did not soften France's well-publicized indig-

nation at having been 'stabbed in the back' by the AUKUS partners.

While the initial AUKUS announcements studiously avoided references to China, that nation's growing challenge to the West was clearly the motivating force behind it. AUKUS is perhaps the most important multilateral initiative so far that is intended to readjust a maritime balance in the Pacific that seemed to be inexorably shifting in China's favor.

OPTIMAL PATHWAY

Operational necessity also does not mitigate the challenges facing the AUKUS partners in delivering 'at least eight' nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy. When the second major milestone of AUKUS was promulgated 18 months after the initial announcement, and the leaders of the three countries revealed the long-awaited conception of an 'optimal pathway' to Australia's new submarine capability, the very complexity of the proposal underscored just how much the undertaking will strain the armed forces and industrial capacities of all three countries.

On March 13th, 2023, at the American naval base in San Diego, California, with a U.S. Navy nuclear-powered

submarine as a backdrop, U.S. President Joe Biden, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, and UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak set out their phased approach. It includes embedding Australian military and civilian personnel with the U.S. Navy, Royal Navy, and the American and British submarine-industrial bases from 2023, as well as increasing port visits by U.S. Navy submarines to Australia and starting similar UK visits in 2026; forward rotations of American and UK submarines to Australia from as early as 2027; the sale of three of the American current-generation *Virginia*-class submarines to Australia in the early 2030s to create a ‘sovereign capability’ for Australia in the operation of such vessels, plus an option for up to two more if needed; and the joint development of a new submarine, SSN-AUKUS, based on the UK’s next-generation nuclear-powered-submarine design but also incorporating Australian and cutting-edge American technology. SSN-AUKUS is slated to serve both the Royal Navy and Royal Australian Navy as an enduring future capability, with the first SSN-AUKUS to be delivered to the Royal Navy in the late 2030s and to the Royal Australian Navy in the early 2040s.

Beyond the new operational capability, and critical to the overall objective, the biggest prize for Australia will

be a sustainable, indigenous building capacity for new-generation submarines, save for the nuclear-propulsion plant based on highly enriched uranium, which will allow the Australian submarines to operate for a full 35-year service life without refueling. The plant will be constructed in the UK and delivered as essentially sealed units to comply with Australia’s nuclear non-proliferation commitments.

A major criticism of AUKUS was that it would not bear fruit in time to be relevant.

Even so, the demands placed on Australia of nuclear stewardship—not just in operation but also in safe oversight—and of establishing the necessary shipbuilding and support infrastructure will be stiff.

Timing, even if it is not everything, remains a critical issue. A major criticism of AUKUS was that it would not bear fruit in time to be relevant. The 2023 Australian Defence Strategic Review emphasized that the ten-year warning the country’s defense planners had previously identified was no longer valid. Yet the most optimistic forecast of when Australia could take delivery of a first indigenously built nuclear-powered submarine was the late 2030s, more likely the early 2040s. Furthermore, Australia could face a submarine gap, as the current *Collins* class would be unlikely to function for that long, even with a planned service-life extension program. To address these worries, the

March 2023 announcement outlined a stepladder approach involving initially small but important incremental developments in the early years, including some capability upgrades.

The uptick in visits of U.S. submarines to the Western Australia submarine base, HMAS Stirling, is meant to help expand the Royal Australian Navy’s knowledge of SSNs. One of the most significant early steps on the AUKUS ladder, from 2027, will be the establishment at HMAS Stirling of a forward rotational presence of up to four U.S. Navy *Virginia*-class submarines and one Royal Navy *Astute*-class SSN, the formation to be known as ‘Submarine Rotational Force – West.’ Included in the bargain are upgrades to HMAS Stirling. Undoubtedly a key factor in Washington’s assessment of the value of AUKUS is access within a few years to an additional forward-operating base for an enhanced submarine flotilla, which would complicate the calculations of China’s military planners. Australia has also undertaken to add a second submarine base on its eastern seaboard.

All three partners have committed to significantly enhancing their respective

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submarine-industrial bases. Canberra has additionally pledged a significant financial injection firstly into U.S. submarine-production capacity and then proportionately into the UK’s industry as well. The partners have

openly acknowledged the challenges, and none have unblemished recent records in meeting similar ones. Moreover, while it may be possible to sustain broad support for the enterprise while these challenges remain notional, when they start to ramify in the form of delays, cost overruns, organizational shortfalls, or clashes of priorities, the risks to the overall project will intensify.

HOVERING CONTINGENCIES

The partner with the biggest stake and proportionately the most on its plate is, of course, Australia. Along with the March 2023 announcement of the optimal pathway came the shock of the first official cost estimate for the AUKUS submarine project to 2055: 368 billion Australian dollars (\$236 billion). Official Australian documents prefer to focus on the less gobsmacking figure of 0.15 percent of GDP that this amount represents. Another leavening factor is that the dollar amount includes a hefty 50 percent contingency, some or all of

which may not be required. And the defense budget is also supposed to grow from 2.0 to 2.2 percent of GDP. Still, the complexity of the undertaking and the risk of cost overruns exceeding the contingency provision could increase financial pressures.

For the Australian government, AUKUS is also about investment in a high technology industrial future, with an estimated 4,000 direct jobs being created in developing the new Submarine Construction Yard in Osborne, South Australia, some 4,000–5,500 to run the shipyard, and around 20,000 across Australia. Yet some analysts have suggested that Australia currently is not producing enough engineers and technicians to furnish the estimated 8,000 personnel with nuclear-related training needed to develop, build, operate and maintain the submarines, let alone the management and regulatory talent and infrastructure required to run and oversee the process effectively.

A key objective is for Australia to be ‘sovereign ready’ to operate and support its own *Virginia*-class submarines from about 2033, just a decade

For the Australian government, AUKUS is also about investment in a high technology industrial future, with an estimated 4,000 direct jobs being created in developing the new Submarine Construction Yard in Osborne, South Australia, some 4,000–5,500 to run the shipyard, and around 20,000 across Australia.

away. For the Royal Australian Navy, on the personnel front alone, that task looks difficult enough. In July 2023, the first three Australian naval officers graduated from the U.S. Navy’s foundation nuclear-propulsion course. They will still require further training to become nuclear-qualified. A decade is barely long enough for the Royal Australian Navy to develop a sufficient cadre of personnel at all the necessary levels to start operating nuclear-powered submarines. A more streamlined but equally rigorous training process may be necessary to meet the 2033 deadline. On top of that, the Royal Australian Navy will likely need at least double the number of highly trained personnel to crew the new flotilla compared to the *Collins* class. The Royal Australian Navy will also need to anticipate the heightened challenge of personnel retention since the crews on the new SSNs might be asked to go on much longer tours than those operating an SSK.

In addition, there remain questions about when and how the new submarines themselves will materialize. Some lingering uncertainty exists over whether U.S. International Traffic in

Arms Regulations will be amended so as to allow for the required technology transfer. Assuming the export control hurdle can be surmounted, as appears likely, the first procurement step calls for the proposed sale of three and possibly up to five *Virginia*-class submarines to Australia, starting in the early 2030s. Critically, this would still be conditional on the approval of the U.S. Congress. Furthermore, as it is, the American industrial base is struggling to fulfil the pre-existing requirement of delivering the new *Columbia* class of nuclear-powered ballistic-missile submarine (SSBN)—the U.S. Navy’s top priority—as well as new *Virginia*-class boats on time and in the numbers contracted for. The navy’s inventory of non-SSBN submarines hovers around the 50 mark, a long way short of the long-term goal of between 66 and 72 boats, with America’s admirals looking to minimize an anticipated near-term dip in numbers at a crucial strategic moment as remaining *Los Angeles*-class boats, the *Virginias*’ forerunners delivered late in the Cold War, are decommissioned.

According to the Royal Australian Navy, the details about which boats the United States will transfer and when it will do so have yet to be worked out. However, the Royal Australian Navy’s working assumption is that the U.S. Navy would provide two existing submarines and order a third newly built vessel, likely the Block III or IV version

of the design most recently in U.S. Navy service, each with a minimum of 20 years of service life remaining.

To offset the impact on U.S. Navy force levels, the U.S. Navy would need the two U.S. submarine yards between them to deliver new boats at the rate of one *Columbia* and two *Virginias* a year for the rest of the decade and into the 2030s. Adding the Australian requirement is estimated to raise the *Virginia* production quota to at least 2.3 per year. Hence the Australian initiative to boost investment in America’s submarine-construction infrastructure. However, despite considerable American investment to bolster the two yards’ capacity, some \$3 to \$4 billion pledged so far, the delivery rate on *Virginia*-class boats is currently running at about 1.4 per year, and it will be five years before it reaches two.

Compounding these obstacles is a backlog of maintenance and support requirements that has significantly reduced the readiness and availability of the U.S. Navy’s current submarine fleet. While the navy is planning a \$2.2 billion injection to shore up the corresponding infrastructure, given estimates that the overall submarine-industrial base has shrunk by some 70 percent from the end of the Cold War, American industry’s ability to absorb significant cash infusions appears to have limits due to skill shortages and supply-chain bottlenecks. The U.S. government and promised Australian

funding may be enough to lift capacity in time, but industrial realities and American priorities seem likely to cast a persistent shadow over AUKUS's prospects.

Potential impediments also abound on the UK side. Britain's industrial base is significantly smaller than America's and also has its work cut out to deliver a new-generation SSBN (the *Dreadnought* class), complete the *Astute* SSNs and gear up for the *Astutes'* successor. For much of the 18-month AUKUS assessment period, the UK seemed to be battling the impression that it would be the junior AUKUS partner, seeking at best consolation prizes, and the assumption that the eventual submarine solution would be an American one. The UK's recent record on submarine delivery—though to an extent attributable to political decisions to string it out to ease budget shortfalls rather than incapacity—has been poor, and the *Astute* program has gained a reputation for being troubled. The 2015 UK Strategic Defence and Security Review tacitly acknowledged the problems by announcing a new organizational structure for the defense-nuclear enterprise. And the *Astute* design seemed to be out of the running for

AUKUS at an early stage, partly because key components, such as the nuclear reactor, were already out of production.

Nevertheless, the UK's next-generation design is seen as a viable basis for meeting Australia's SSN-AUKUS

American industry's ability to absorb significant cash infusions appears to have limits due to skill shortages and supply-chain bottlenecks. The U.S. government and promised Australian funding may be enough to lift capacity in time, but industrial realities and American priorities seem likely to cast a persistent shadow over AUKUS's prospects.

requirements, as the U.S. Navy's next submarine design, the SSN(X), scheduled for procurement in the mid-2030s, looks to be too much for the Royal Australian Navy to handle. It will likely be larger and more sophisticated than the *Virginia* class, and as a December 2023 report by the Congressional Research Service suggests, significantly more expensive at an estimated \$5.6 to 7.2 billion per copy compared to \$4.3 billion for the latest Block V *Virginias*.

The SSN-AUKUS design project may increase the UK's chances for staying in the nuclear-powered-submarine construction and operating business. The country's current low force level (four SSBNs and seven *Astute*-class SSNs planned) leaves it at the ragged edge of viability as a nuclear-powered-submarine constructor. The Royal Navy's ambition is to regrow the force to perhaps a dozen new attack boats in

addition to the SSBNs. That was always going to require significant additional funding. The AUKUS arrangement bolsters the rationale for authorizing it. On top of that, the proposed addition of extra cutting-edge American technology—a vertical launch system for cruise missiles and perhaps future remote technology, plus an enhanced reactor plant—could yield a better submarine for the Royal Navy than it would otherwise have been able to design and afford. The success of AUKUS could also yield greater short-term influence for the UK, linked to its ability to deploy forces with substantial combat capability to the region in the form of increased numbers of submarines. The more established Australia becomes in delivering that kind of capability with the UK's help, however, the less need there may be for the UK to do the same.

Overall, the SSN-AUKUS piece of the submarine package is the most fragile one because the uncertainties are the greatest. The details of the design remain essentially unknown, at least to the public. So do specifics about what the production plan will look like, how integrated it will be, and particularly how the labor will be divided between BAE Systems' UK yard at Barrow-in-Furness

and Australia's Osborne facility. Furthermore, the apparent introduction of a U.S.–Australia command system could threaten the UK's expertise and industrial stake in that technological area, as could non-British weapons systems, if selected, in another. The greater the number of potential divergences between British and Australian requirements, the greater the risks of delays and cost increases.

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To meet the planned delivery dates of a first Royal Navy SSN-AUKUS submarine by the late 2030s and a first Royal Australian Navy vessel by the early 2040s, work would have to start on the new vessels before the end of this decade. UK industry—BAE Systems and Rolls-

Royce in particular—are already ramping up capabilities to deliver on the new propulsion system. BAE Systems aims to grow its Barrow workforce from 10,000–11,000 people to around 17,000, as then UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace confirmed in January 2023. Similarly, Rolls-Royce has announced it plans to nearly double the size of its Raynesway reactor-production facility. Meeting these targets will be a challenge. Special concern has arisen about the shortage of nuclear expertise, with both the defense and the civilian sector aiming at expansion—the latter to

build new nuclear-power-generation capacity. This has led the government to inaugurate a UK Nuclear Skills Task Force. While tough ‘no poaching’ agreements will surely be part of the AUKUS framework, there will undoubtedly be a strong temptation for skilled UK workers and even submarine personnel to opt for a new life in Australia.

Australia’s option to buy a fourth and fifth Virginia-class submarine is a hedge against delays in SSN-AUKUS procurement, or even its failure as a design. A lack of clarity as to how many SSN-AUKUS submarines might be built is another uncertainty that makes the program especially vulnerable. The Australians could at some point ‘jump ship’ and opt for an American solution after all for its indigenous submarine design. Meanwhile, the UK may be pressed to deliver on another key element of the contribution contemplated by the AUKUS deal: the forward deployment of an *Astute* to the Pacific for extended periods starting in 2027. A maximum of seven SSNs will be available over the next decade and a half at least, and a report was recently published highlighting a period when none of the current submarines were at sea. Given these factors and demands to support national and NATO requirements closer

AUKUS has long been recognized as a high-reward, high-risk enterprise, particularly with respect to the submarine pillar. Heavy lifting will be required to make it all come together.

to home, it remains unclear whether it will be sensible or plausible to dispatch an *Astute* to the Pacific.

POSSIBLE BLOWBACK

AUKUS has long been recognized as a high-reward, high-risk enterprise, particularly with respect to the submarine pillar. Heavy lifting will be required to make it all come together. The fallout that could arise from the severe faltering or abandonment of the project would depend on the precise circumstances and context, and on when the crisis occurs. China is likely to remain a peer competitor of the United States for decades to come, and the intensity of great-power competition does not appear likely to abate in the short run. But it could diminish over AUKUS’s long time span—undercutting the rationale for much of the project—and perhaps be supplanted by another global challenge of a very different character. Meanwhile, economic and budgetary pressures, notably in a post-Brexit UK beset by relatively weak economic growth, could force painful choices among military, and between military and civilian, priorities. Maintaining coherence against the ebbs and flows of politics in all three countries is a known challenge, with a resurgence

of isolationist impulses in the United States a particular Australian and British anxiety.

Canberra could also change its mind as the economic burden grows and the country has to confront some of the more politically sensitive AUKUS undertakings, such as managing all the radioactive waste produced. Furthermore, Australia’s Defence Strategic Review has produced a key judgement that Australia can no longer afford to maintain a range of balanced forces and must concentrate on a more focused posture. Increased AUKUS pressures could force an even greater narrowing of choices and cuts in other capabilities

If AUKUS is seen as strengthening the strategic linkage between the United States and Australia, and as an American endorsement of a close ally, unravelling it would likely have the reverse effect. The alliance would survive, but Washington would regard Canberra as a diminished partner.

to the point at which the opportunity costs of AUKUS appeared unsustainable. Torpedoing the enterprise would pose risks to the credibility of Australia’s overall defense posture, and could jeopardize its relationship with the United States, a critical ally. The fallout from the break with France over submarine procurement was spectacular and unfortunate, but not critical and apparently repairable. The United States, however, has gone to far greater lengths than France to support Australia’s ambitions, to the point of sharing some

security ‘crown jewels’ in the form of nuclear-propulsion technology. If AUKUS is seen as strengthening the strategic linkage between the United States and Australia, and as an American endorsement of a close ally, unravelling it would likely have the reverse effect. The alliance would survive, but Washington would regard Canberra as a diminished partner.

Washington could also get cold feet, calculating that the deal’s potential impacts on America’s defense capabilities were prohibitive and returns marginal. While alternative arrangements could conceivably dilute perceptions of American unreliability, regional and global powers might still assess such a turn of events as evidence of uncertainty about Washington’s strategic commitment.

The UK may be even more vulnerable to the consequences of AUKUS’s failure than the other partners. Its global defense standing—and more acutely its vaunted ‘special relationship’ with the United States—could suffer profoundly. The nuclear partnership has been one of the most tangible elements of that relationship. Were the UK to lose the industrial opportunities AUKUS offers, its own

national nuclear-powered-submarine program might begin to look increasingly tenuous and difficult to sustain, with maintaining a submarine-based nuclear deterrent the chief but increasingly burdensome justification. Getting out of the nuclear-powered-submarine business or having to rely almost wholly on the Americans for the technology and even the supply of submarines—assuming the United States could even cope with that—would inevitably diminish its overall strategic standing. However, the UK Defence Equipment Plan 2022–2032 underscored that the country’s nuclear capability—including nuclear weapons—accounted for the largest single cost of procurement, at £59.7 billion out of total planned expenditures of £236.5 billion over ten years. There may come a point at which the opportunity cost of incurring that expense becomes too great to bear.

PINGS FROM THE PAST

Some of the cross-currents and impulses that have featured in the evolution of AUKUS echo the deliberations and exchanges that led to the 1958 agreement between the UK and the U.S. on sharing submarine nuclear-propulsion technology. In the mid-1950s, there was growing concern in the Royal Navy that

its experimentation with new submarine propulsion based on hydrogen peroxide was getting nowhere, and that the service’s capabilities were falling farther and farther behind those of its rivals and potential opponents. UK research on submarine nuclear propulsion took a back seat to military and civil nuclear work. This state of affairs prompted the UK to take a more proactive approach in seeking access to American nuclear-propulsion technology.

A 1957 visit to UK waters by the USS *Nautilus*, the first nuclear-powered submarine, quelled British skepticism by clearly demonstrating its mas-

sively superior performance. There were legislative hurdles to overcome, and U.S. Navy concerns to be assuaged that any support to the UK should not impede its own efforts to develop nuclear propulsion for its fleet. But shared concerns about Soviet advances helped cement the United States’ agreement to share the nuclear-propulsion technology with the UK.

The U.S. and the UK’s early Cold War relationship also produced a cautionary tale about the potential impact of one partner’s scrapping a program that was critical for the other. In the early 1960s, the UK was looking to

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an American air-launched ballistic missile, the *Skybolt*, to prolong the effective life of its ‘V bomber’ nuclear-strike force. When, in late 1962, the United States decided to cancel *Skybolt*, UK prime minister Harold Macmillan hurried to Nassau for talks with U.S. President John F. Kennedy to persuade him to sell Britain the American *Polaris* submarine-launched ballistic-missile system to offset the unsustainability of the bomber force precipitated by the *Skybolt*’s cancellation. Macmillan argued that Britain would otherwise have to review its entire global defense posture, which could produce a deep and strategically damaging rift in Anglo-American relations. The UK’s standing as a major power and a member of NATO seemed to do the trick, but perhaps there was also an understanding on the American side about the implications of this decision for the stability of the British government. The United States reluctantly agreed, with the proviso that the UK’s *Polaris* force would also be assigned to NATO.

In the 1960s, of course, both the UK and the U.S. could fall back on very extensive defense-industrial bases and much larger armed forces, including the submarine forces from which to draw resources. The regulatory environments in both countries and globally were also considerably less onerous. The Royal Navy’s first SSN, HMS *Dreadnought*, with a U.S.-supplied reactor, was commissioned into service just five years

after the joint agreement was concluded. Britain’s first *Polaris* SSBN, HMS *Resolution*, embarked on its first patrol in June 1968, less than six years after the Nassau meeting. Sixty years ago, the two parties did not have to consider generational factors to the extent that they do today, when the aims of the AUKUS submarine project cannot be fulfilled in much less than a quarter of a century.

The AUKUS partners agree that the potential strategic dividends of the arrangement currently outweigh the risks. For Australia and the UK, AUKUS has the character of a national endeavor given the scale and gravity of its demands. AUKUS will likely drive a significant change in the shape, focus, and character of their respective armed forces, particularly their navies. For the United States, the direct costs and benefits are part of a broader calculation of what an enhanced relationship with Australia offers, including growing options for forward basing other critical assets and a wider deterrent posture. As the project unfolds, however, and particularly as divisive issues become more urgent, maintaining political and strategic alignments among the three capitals will inevitably become more challenging. AUKUS could become a foundational relationship among the three comparable in its strategic cohesiveness to the Anglo-American nuclear relationship. But failure to deliver, or delivering at too high a price, could have equally adverse consequences. ●