

AUKUS, Japan, and a new security dilemma in the Asia-Pacific

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The expansion of AUKUS raise questions about weapons proliferation, a new arms race, and the emergence of a security dilemma in Asia-Pacific.



Credit: BAE Systems

Introduction

With the goal of safeguarding an open and free Indo-Pacific area, the [trilateral security pact](#) between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) appears to be gathering traction and ushering in a new phase of development in Japan's defence collaboration. It is believed that an announcement addressing the [formal invitation](#) to join from the AUKUS partners to Japan would be made during Prime Minister Fumio Kushida's scheduled visit to the White House on April 10. Japan would be the first country invited to

become a member of the trilateral AUKUS arrangement since its formation in September 2021.

Minister for Defence Richard Marles expressed his support for Japan's entry into the group in December 2022. Less than a year later, in August 2023, the United States, South Korea, and Japan inked a cooperation agreement on defence, security, and technology at Camp David. In the same month, the UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee report, ['Tilting Horizons: The Integrated Review and the Indo-Pacific'](#), emphasised the benefits of Japan (and South Korea) joining AUKUS's technical defence cooperation agreement in terms of 'pillar 2' activities. The goal of this collaboration is to reinforce AUKUS's submarine acquisition, and one way to accomplish this is to collaborate on defensive technology. This will allow Japan to contribute to the development of AUKUS' offensive and defensive armaments.

Arming Australia

AUKUS is based on [two pillars](#). The first supports Australia's rapid procurement of nuclear submarines armed with conventional weapons. The second is centred on AUKUS's trilateral cooperation in the development of critical security technologies and sophisticated combat capabilities such as cyber, artificial intelligence (AI), underwater drones, hypersonic missiles, and electronic warfare instruments. AUKUS also seeks to minimise coercion in peaceful resolutions while upholding the rule of law and human rights.

Japan's partnership with AUKUS may appear rational from a Western standpoint, especially given its advantageous location in the first island chain and its renowned status as an 'innovation nation'. The justification for the expansion of AUKUS can also be ascribed to the Western assessment and portrayal of China as a rising threat, as well as [Beijing's assertive behaviour](#) in the South China Sea (SCS). This includes its extensive territorial claims, militarization efforts, deployment of defensive and offensive assets, and its display of a willingness to take on risks that may lead to military confrontation or interstate warfare. By collaborating on submarine technology, Australia and Japan would jointly assume the responsibility of countering China alongside the US in the Asia-Pacific.

However, the West's aim to contain China necessitates Australia acquiring a new fleet of modern submarines due to the challenges it faces in maintaining and deploying its current fleet of [antiquated and technically deficient vessels](#). Due to a capacity reduction, Australia's

submarine fleet consisted of a single combat-ready vessel at the start of 2023. In March 2023, the three AUKUS leaders established an 'optimal pathway' for Australia to purchase US Virginia-class submarines as a 'vital capability', noting that the agreement will uphold the strictest non-proliferation standards and norms. In response to mounting concerns about potential delays in US supply, Australia and the United Kingdom recently signed a [defence and security agreement](#). This deal reflects Australia's commitment to pay US\$3 billion to manufacture nuclear reactors for BAE Systems submarines based in Adelaide.

The Virginia class of nuclear-powered fast-attack submarines is widely recognised for its exceptional stealth and versatility, making it one of the most technologically advanced submarines. It has the ability to efficiently intercept and eliminate the strategic assets of other nations at sea, including Russian and Chinese ballistic missile submarines. Despite Australia's declaration that its new submarines will not carry nuclear weapons, Virginia-class submarines can carry and launch cruise missiles equipped with nuclear warheads.

Renewed controversy and challenges

The establishment of AUKUS generated an instant outcry in Moscow and Beijing. China has since continued to criticise the pact, describing it as a manifestation of the West's 'cold war' mindset, posing a serious risk of military escalation and undermining the stability of the region. The Kremlin stated that AUKUS's submarine deals pose serious concerns about proliferation. Similar to how the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in Europe has eroded Russia's sense of ontological security, AUKUS's actions may exacerbate China's anxiety about external threats, fostering an even deeper sense of insecurity in Beijing.

Both Russia and China continue to strongly reject AUKUS and the secrecy surrounding its arms purchase and objectives, emphasising the dangers of nuclear weapon proliferation and the resulting violation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). According to [Wang Wenbin](#), spokesman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, these accords 'totally disregard the concerns of the world communities and are travelling farther and further down the path of error and risks'.

The idea of an expanding AUKUS is to strengthen Western multilateral security cooperation against other countries, mainly China, therefore isolating and undermining the Chinese

state's security. Beijing may choose to strengthen its existing partnerships with Iran or Russia or establish new ones as a counterbalance to restoring its security consciousness. While the West has expressed concern about [China's military modernisation](#), citing potential negative consequences for regional security, China's view of Western arms sales and military developments as a significant danger is equally justified. Both have the ability to create confusion about the objectives of the other and weaken trust in Western security cooperation under the auspices of AUKUS. As a result, states become more suspicious and fearful.

The emergence of a security dilemma?

While the idea of membership remains abstract, Japan's collaboration with AUKUS on 'pillar 2' as a strategic counterweight to perceived regional threats—specifically, Beijing's growing military power, ambitions, and influence in the region—exemplifies expansionist motivations and the potential for creating a security dilemma, as conceptualised by Herbert Butterfield, John Herz, and Robert Jervis.

The security dilemma is essential for understanding how states, which primarily desire to maintain peace as well as ensure their survival, become embroiled in destructive conflict and war. According to offensive realist John Mearsheimer, the security dilemma makes war both likely and rational. States, in general, require non-proliferation structures and procedures to feel secure, or at least create a pretence of it. AUKUS violates this core premise by advocating for expanded military and technological collaboration with Tokyo, as well as supporting Canberra's acquisition of the world's most advanced and powerful nuclear submarines. Indonesia and Malaysia have expressed concerns over AUKUS's increasing security ties, fearing that Australia's purchase and construction of submarines may spark a new arms race in the region.

The [lack of transparency](#) in AUKUS has clearly led China and other countries to mistrust the pact's intentions. Cooperation between AUKUS and Japan would create the appearance of a more robust 'defence' alliance encircling China in an effort to contain it. Rather than preventing China from acting aggressively, this collaboration may strengthen the need for extra security measures or preemptive actions. Despite having only three formal members, AUKUS has more than two dozen allies and partners, including India and NATO nations. Its

military installations and presence span the Western Pacific, from Japan to Australia, with a military outpost in the Indian Ocean and more bases in North America, Europe, and the Middle East.

Brent J. Steele, a Professor of Political Science at the University of Utah, contends that 'the anxiety that consumes all social agents', including states, 'motivates them to secure their sense of being'. China and other countries may perceive the rise of AUKUS as a significant security concern, prompting a reciprocal pursuit of actions, such as China reinforcing its anti-Western security cooperation and partnerships, to satisfy its own sense of being and security. If directed at a specific third party, a more powerful AUKUS could jeopardise the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific regional order to the point that states anticipate and prepare for war.

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