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AUKUS Renewed: Confronting Resilience Failures and Reframing the Narrative

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Cover: Flags of the
AUKUS states: Australia,
the United Kingdom and
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Introduction

There are many reasons why it can be challenging for foreign policy doctrines, projects or narratives to take hold within British institutions. The most significant of these are the absence of effective political leadership, the incompatibility of new concepts with existing priorities, and the active resistance of institutional decision-makers to changing course on established priorities. Any one of these obstacles can mean the difference between success and failure, and the presence of all three can be terminal for new initiatives that need risk-tolerance and adaptive mindsets.

This paper explores the AUKUS trilateral security pact between the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and the United States (US), as a unique example of how novel defence and security priorities can simultaneously succeed in capturing institutional attention while failing to secure strategic momentum. By examining the decisions taken about AUKUS strategy and communications following its announcement in September 2021, this paper will highlight how well-meaning decisions and embedded institutional cultures can hinder the advancement of national defence missions.

The political risks to AUKUS differ between the three partners. In the US, the risk is of isolationist impulses depleting the willingness to pursue greater integration with allies. In the UK, the risk is of strategic drift amid competing budgetary pressures. In Australia, the failure to win public consent for the considerable sums involved in building a sovereign nuclear enterprise could see the entire endeavour abandoned for shorter-term options that do not address the structural need. However, the question of the survival of AUKUS extends well beyond the uncertainties that plague most high-profile defence capability collaborations. AUKUS is a litmus test for the health, functioning and capacity of three of the West's most consequential powers, and a prototype for a dynamic new outcome-focused alliance structure which will be essential to the ability of democracies to triumph over increasingly assertive and collaborative authoritarian states. If the three most highly integrated security partners cannot deliver on their domestic security needs, nor work effectively together to amass scale and accelerate pace, the future of the West lies in peril.

This paper is divided into three sections.

Part one opens with an examination of the clandestine origins of AUKUS and the impact these beginnings had on fostering a culture of caution and secrecy, which continues to plague the pact five years on. It then explores the significance of AUKUS and how its relevance and value to each of the partners has increased since its conception. The paper then examines the role that narrative challenges, strategic communication choices and limited transparency have played in weakening the social licence and political resilience required to sustain a generational project of this nature.

Part two shines a spotlight on the considerable sustainment risks that AUKUS has faced in both Australia and the US, due to elite polarisation, contests over allied integration and limited public mandates. It then explores the failure of AUKUS to gain wider purchase within the British government aside from a narrow capability development and nuclear project, and the role that institutional cultures and competing strategic narratives played in this outcome.

Responding to these challenges, part three examines how AUKUS can become more structurally embedded in the UK's foundational security and growth agendas, with tactical reframing and novel narratives strengthening the resilience of a historically significant alliance model. With the three current national governments having now committed to taking AUKUS forward "full steam ahead",¹ this paper concludes with a suite of policy recommendations for the British government to maximise the UK's contributions and opportunities within the pact.

¹ Ministry of Defence and John Healey, *UK 'All In' on AUKUS Submarine and Tech Delivery as Partnership Powers Full Steam Ahead* (GOV.UK, 2025), <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-all-in-on-aukus-submarine-and-tech-delivery-as-partnership-powers-full-steam-ahead>.

Part One: The Stakes of AUKUS and Tests of Resilience

Clandestine Origins

AUKUS is a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the UK and the US, which was publicly announced on 15 September 2021.² Its origins lie in the bedrock of longstanding trilateral military and intelligence cooperation between its members, and the evolution of more recent strategic concerns in the Indo-Pacific region as China undertakes the largest military build-up in scale since the Second World War.³

The three members of AUKUS are partners in the Five Eyes intelligence alliance, which was first formalised in 1946 with the signing of the UKUSA Agreement between US and UK.⁴ Australia joined the partnership a decade later. All three nations have subsequently cooperated in live conflict operations, and have deeply integrated security and technological apparatus, which have conferred the foundation of deep trust necessary to pursue such a project.⁵

AUKUS assumed strategic urgency in the context of China's increasing militarisation and its growing assertiveness and aggression in the Indo-Pacific theatre, which shone a light on Australia's geographical significance and also its security vulnerabilities.⁶ When, during the coronavirus pandemic, China pursued economic coercion towards Australia in response to its government's call for an inquiry into the origins of the destructive virus,⁷ the early scoping conversations for AUKUS developed a greater sense of urgency.

Australia had signed a major contract with France in 2016 to build conventional diesel-electric submarines.⁸ However the project was besieged by rising costs and drifting timeframes.⁹ As the security context sharpened, it became clear that nuclear submarines would be needed to guarantee the longer range and stealth required to adequately deter adversaries. Australia turned to its two closest partners, the UK and the US, which both possess nuclear submarine technology and have deeply established submarine industrial enterprises. Negotiations were conducted at the highest levels of secrecy for almost two years, and even the most trusted of other allied

2 Louisa Brooke-Holland, John Curtis, and Claire Mills, *The AUKUS Agreement* (House of Commons Library, 2021), <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9335/>.

3 International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2023* (IISS, 2023), <https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/the-military-balance-2023/>.

4 Claire Mills, *UK-US Mutual Defence Agreement* [Research Briefing SN03147] (House of Commons Library, 2014), <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn03147/>; David Easter, "GCHQ and British External Policy in the 1960s," *Intelligence and National Security* 23, no. 5 (2008): 681–706, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684520802449526>.

5 Nick Bisley, "Australia's Indo-Pacific Strategy: From Optimism to Hard Balancing," *Asia Policy* 18, no. 3 (2023): 35–45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27254667>.

6 Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities – Background and Issues for Congress* (Congressional Research Service, 2022), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33153>.

7 H. Farrell et al., "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 42–79, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00351.

8 Hayley Channer, *Explainer: AUKUS' Economics – The Price of a Megaproject* (United States Studies Centre, 2023), <https://www.usc.edu.au/explainer-aukus-economics-the-price-of-a-megaproject>.

9 Zoya Sheftalovich, "Why Australia Wanted Out of Its French Submarine Deal," *Político*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/why-australia-wanted-out-of-its-french-sub-deal/>.

nations were not consulted prior to the announcement.¹⁰ Even beyond the sensitivities pertaining to the French contract, nuclear submarine technology transfer is subject to legislative restrictions and involves commitments at the most senior levels of government. The US had only ever shared this technology on one previous occasion, with the UK during the Cold War in the 1958 US–UK Mutual Defence Agreement, which was secured after protracted negotiations.¹¹

AUKUS was henceforth conceived in great secrecy, due to the focus of its Pillar I on the sensitive technology of nuclear submarines and the wider geopolitical context, including Australia's existing agreement with France concerning a contract for conventional submarines.¹² The clandestine nature of the planning and the scarce number of very senior officials involved set a precedent for the future governance of AUKUS, which has become, at times, extremely inwardly focused, cautious and risk-averse.¹³ Following the initial announcement of the pact, it was communicated that the three partners would be working for 18 months to determine the Optimal Pathway Agreement for the design and construction of the SSN-AUKUS nuclear submarines.¹⁴ This focused effort further compounded and prolonged the restrictive environment surrounding the project, enabling a public debate to emerge about AUKUS with relatively scarce interventions from the three governments.

In the end, the novel and highly modern nature of the pact encouraged institutional conservatism, while also requiring a more inclusive and ambitious whole-of-nation engagement strategy, which was not forthcoming. The resulting omertà around its progress has injected an unhelpful degree of fragility into an alliance predicated on long-term resilience.

The Stakes of AUKUS Success and Failure

For as long as AUKUS has existed as a pact, questions about its possible failure have plagued commentary about its future. It is a high-risk, high-reward endeavour, which will fundamentally test the defence performance of three consequential democracies and the capacity for practical Western alliances to function and deliver effectively. In this respect, the question as to whether AUKUS will collapse or fail to deliver extends much more deeply than is the case with other defence cooperation initiatives. It provides a barometer of the three governments' capacity to deliver on the most elementary aspects of national security, and an existential test for the allied partnerships that have given the West such a profound advantage over transactional authoritarian states.

¹⁰ "Aukus: UK, US and Australia Launch Pact," *BBC*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-58564837>; Lloyd Cox, "AUKUS: A Bloc of Anglo-Saxon Powers," *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 12, no. 1 (2026): e70064, <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.70064>.

¹¹ *Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and The Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland for Cooperation on the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defense Purposes* (US Department of State, 1958). The Agreement was re-ratified in 2024. See: Mills, C. (September 6, 2024). Amendments to the UK-US Mutual Defence Agreement. House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10086/>.

¹² Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future* (La Trobe University Press, 2020), 169–170; Luke Gosling, *Deterring at a Distance: The Strategic Logic of AUKUS* (Lowy Institute, 2024), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/deterring-distance-strategic-logic-aukus>.

¹³ Andrew Dowse, Megan McKernan, James Black, Stephanie Young, Austin Wyatt, John P. Godges, Nicolas Jouan, and Joanne Nicholson, *AUKUS Collaboration Throughout the Capability Life Cycle: Implications for Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution Processes* (RAND Corporation, 2024), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2195-1.html>.

¹⁴ UK Prime Minister's Office, *Fact Sheet: Trilateral Australia-UK-US Partnership on Nuclear-powered Submarines* (UK Government, 2023), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus-13-march-2023/fact-sheet-trilateral-australia-uk-us-partnership-on-nuclear-powered-submarines>.

If the UK, Australia and the US fail to dramatically scale up their submarine industrial bases, as AUKUS intends to achieve, then they will have abdicated their capacity to achieve maritime dominance, or even parity, against increasingly militarily sophisticated and assertive global adversaries. This will significantly undermine their ability to project deterrence, let alone defend sovereign assets and territories, particularly as conflicts fragment and become concomitant across multiple theatres. As such, the question as to whether AUKUS might fail due to issues pertaining to the timeliness and cost of delivery schedules for the submarine industrial base should be understood as considerably more fundamental dilemmas that cut to the heart of the three governments' foremost responsibilities to protect their respective homelands and secure their wider global interests.

While delivering on Pillar I requires a considerable uplift in tried-and-tested capabilities, Pillar II takes AUKUS into uncharted territory. There has been much historical debate as to the foundational significance of Pillar II and the degree to which it can be seen to be intrinsic to the alliance construct.¹⁵ One theory is that Pillar II was always central to the AUKUS pact, and that the considerable budget lines and ambition of Pillar I simply obscured its significance. Another interpretation suggests that Pillar II was germinated to broaden the political appeal of the agreement, to soften the shock of the cancellation of Australia's submarine contract with France by contextualising the SSN-AUKUS as part of a wider programme of cooperation, and to provide tangible outcomes of the pact in advance of the extended timeframe for the submarine development. The third argument is that Pillar II was intended to support the dismantling of US regulatory barriers, particularly the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) export controls, which have impeded technology-sharing with even the closest US allies. From this perspective, the momentum around the announcement of the pact would provide the political permission to advance industrial integration after years of stalled progress.¹⁶

It is possible that the latter two of these interpretations are indeed legitimate, but were dividends of the concept development rather than being embedded in the original proposition. It is clear, for example, that the deterrence function that AUKUS provides against adversaries is most authentically projected through tangible and visible progress – even if Pillar II was, at the time of its announcement, not clearly defined in terms of its objectives and outputs. The first official record of Pillar II set out a series of broad cooperation areas, which vary in specificity, encompassing cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, undersea systems, advanced missiles, defence innovation and industrial cooperation. The nature of the list has been the subject of much subsequent discussion in the three nations' policy communities, generally focusing on the question of why certain areas were included or sidestepped, and whether it would be preferable to focus on capabilities or domains. The increasingly important domain of space, for example, is not specifically identified, but becomes relevant to several of these capabilities.¹⁷

15 Peter Dean and Alice Nason, "AUKUS Pillar II Is Failing in Its Mission: It Needs Its Own Optimal Pathway," *War on the Rocks*, June 2, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/06/aukus-pillar-ii-is-failing-in-its-mission-it-needs-its-own-optimal-pathway/>.

16 R. Clarke Cooper, "On the Third AUKUS Anniversary, A Toast to ITAR Reform and a Call to Keep Going," *Atlantic Council*, September 18, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/on-the-third-aukus-anniversary-a-toast-to-itar-reform-and-a-call-to-keep-going>.

17 Melissa de Zwart, "Space, and AUKUS: What Is the Relevance and Impact of Australia's Participation in AUKUS in the Space Domain?" in *Regional Commentary: The Foundations of Australia's Space Policy*, ed. T. Moss (Griffith Asia Institute, 2023), 82–90.

It is self-evident that the incentives to drive allied collaboration around advanced military capabilities have only intensified in the five years since AUKUS was announced,¹⁸ although the barriers to the practical realisation of these projects remain significant.¹⁹ In particular, progress in undertaking the export control reforms needed to forge a true innovation ecosystem has been meaningful but slow, with the institutional impulses towards sovereign containment of advanced technologies remaining steadfast.²⁰ There have also been considerable challenges in overcoming bureaucratic and administrative hurdles to the functioning of a trilateral marketplace, including streamlining rudimentary issues such as the mutual recognition of classifications and security clearances needed to facilitate personnel mobility even within companies themselves. Furthermore, the issues surrounding industrial competition between the three partners have sharpened: as the global security environment has deteriorated, the same incentives driving cooperation are also fuelling national missions to strengthen sovereignty.

Nevertheless, it is also the case that the extraordinary pace at which China has secured dominance over vital innovation pipelines at the expense of the West, whether through subterfuge or inherent capability, requires more focused efforts of intensified collaboration in order to amplify strengths, accelerate production and achieve the scale needed to retain superiority.²¹ In this respect, AUKUS should be understood, in historical terms, as a turning point in the nature of alliances in the 21st century. One of the most modern and novel aspects of the AUKUS pact is the integration of advanced capabilities into its deterrence construct, as it seeks to create the conditions through which nascent and emerging technologies can be continually developed in a manner that exceeds the lifespan of the defined nuclear submarine project. It is also true that the broader scope of the pact through Pillar II enables a more holistic purview over the interdependence and integration of different capabilities, and the formation of a coherent innovation ecosystem.

The decision by the Trump administration to pursue critical minerals and commercial technological agreements with the UK and Australia, concurrently with the AUKUS pact, reflects a recognition that allied cooperation must evolve to encompass the full end-to-end value chain of defence materials, innovation and production. Advanced technologies and the resources that fuel them are the central arena of geoeconomic and geostrategic competition, and it is no longer sufficient to focus solely on the capabilities themselves but on the full suite of components that are crucial to their development.²² It is rational to assume that our adversaries and competitors will seek to restrict access to these resources, and also that the broader precipitation of global conflicts and the associated impacts on shipping and trade will expose vulnerabilities in advanced-capability

18 Alessio Patalano, *Submission to the House of Commons Select Defence Committee Inquiry on AUKUS* (UK Parliament, 2025), <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/142285/html/>.

19 Christianson, J., Monaghan, S., & Cooke, D. (July 10, 2023). AUKUS Pillar Two: Advancing the capabilities of the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia. Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/aukus-pillar-two-advancing-capabilities-united-states-united-kingdom-and-australia>

20 Tom Corben, "Even with Intended Reforms, US Defence Trade Rules Threaten AUKUS Cooperation," *The Strategist*, February 12, 2024, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/even-with-intended-reforms-us-defence-trade-rules-threaten-aukus-cooperation/>.

21 Scott Kennedy, *The Power of Innovation: The Strategic Value of China's High-Tech Drive* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2026), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/power-innovation-strategic-value-chinas-high-tech-drive>.

22 J. Saura et al., "How Does Technology Enable Competitive Advantage? Reviewing State of the Art and Outlining Future Directions," *Journal of Competitiveness* 14, no. 4 (2022): 172–188, <https://doi.org/10.7441/joc.2022.04.10>.

supply chains.²³ In this vein, Pillar II becomes an organising principle through which to build a cohesive trilateral industrial ecosystem that supports the full lifecycle of technological innovation and provides the necessary redundancies to drive genuine resilience.

The interest shown by the AUKUS allies' partners in the advanced capabilities endeavour reveals an emerging consensus around the need to develop agile new formats for accelerated co-creation.²⁴ In particular, Japan and South Korea have expressed their interest in the AUKUS structure as a means of achieving allied scale.²⁵ It is essential that the three founding partners of AUKUS demonstrate tangible progress on Pillar II before others are brought into the tent, and it would be preferable for its core to remain static and privileged, despite the participation of others in specified projects. However, there is undoubtedly an opportunity to harness AUKUS as a prototype of a more flexible alliance model in which those allies that share a strategic outlook, and that are willing to put resources on the table to achieve improved outcomes together, are able to mobilise around specific goals and capabilities.

A profound curiosity of the AUKUS pact is the fact that while the three partners' Western allies recognise its significance and take a keen interest in its progress, as does China,²⁶ this immense value has often felt obscured and ambiguous among the AUKUS nations themselves. Before any concrete efforts can be made to address the profound risks facing AUKUS, all three partners must truly accept the substantive opportunity and meaning the pact represents, and what would therefore be at stake in its downfall.

Collective Challenges in Securing Public and Political Consent for AUKUS

For an undertaking of such scale, cost and duration, the long-term resilience of AUKUS will depend not only on strategic alignment and industrial capability, but also on the extent to which it is able to remain both politically resilient and accepted by the societies it is intended to serve. While Pillar I has achieved a substantial degree of institutional embedding in all three countries, this success has not been matched by efforts to cultivate deep and durable public support.²⁷ A robust state-level commitment accompanied by uneven societal grounding is not a durable basis for long-term political support.²⁸

One of the foremost strategic communications afflicting AUKUS has been the esoteric nature of the ways in which AUKUS has been received in narrative terms by the three partners' policy and political environments, which reflect the distinct dividends and investments of the pact. For the US, AUKUS represents a meaningful investment in allied scale and enhanced basing to support its strategic competition with China, and a propulsive force from

23 Farrell and Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence," 42–79.

24 Sharinee Jagtiani and Dylan Welch, "A Transatlantic Tech Partnership," *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, February 27, 2026, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/transatlantic-tech-partnership>.

25 T. Yoshihara, "Japan's Evolving Role in Indo-Pacific Security Minilateralism," *Naval War College Review* 77, no. 1 (2024).

26 Frank Rose, *AUKUS Will Be Worth the Work. China's Alarm Shows Why Trump Should Get Onboard* (Lowy Institute, 2025), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/aukus-will-be-worth-work-china-s-alarm-shows-why-trump-should-get-onboard>.

27 W. T. Tow, "Minilateral Security's Relevance to US Indo-Pacific Strategy," *The Pacific Review* 36, no. 3 (2023): 493–520.

28 D. A. Lake, "Two Cheers for Bargaining Theory," *International Security* 35, no. 3 (2010): 7–52.

which to drive the focused uplift of its submarine industrial base necessary to defend its homeland and maintain global commitments. For Australia, AUKUS is a colossal undertaking to secure the nation's vital security by developing novel nuclear capabilities in the pursuit of homeland defence and balancing the regional security landscape. The investments being made in AUKUS and the nuclear submarine endeavour are so significant that they affect Australia's capacity to invest in other programmes of record, and the need to build a workforce from scratch requires generational commitments. For the UK, AUKUS supports an enhanced submarine industrial base for defending the Euro-Atlantic maritime domain and the opportunity to harness the nation's competitive advantages in advanced technologies to accelerate military development at pace and scale. Unlike its other two AUKUS partners, the UK is primarily a knowledge economy, and therefore the strengthening of its technological and research and development base is not simply a matter of resilience but of economic advantage.

Efforts to harmonise trilateral narratives pertaining to AUKUS from the moment of its announcement flattened these distinct national stories, and made the pact's outcomes more abstract and less tangible. A decision was also taken from its conception to refrain from identifying the specific driver of competition and the focus of deterrence, China, and rather to emphasise the pact's intended value as a collective amplifier of allied power and scale.²⁹

Choices such as these ultimately reinforced the development of a project culture which, above all, elevated the significance of the largely insular trilateral endeavour and rendered public communications distant and obtuse. At times, it felt to some observers that this inward project focus and vigilant rhetorical approach came at the expense of other worthy objectives, such as ensuring AUKUS produced its intended outcomes at a pace commensurate with the nature of the threat, or prioritising the engagement of the public whose interests it sought to protect.

The political resilience of AUKUS has also been tested from its earliest stages. AUKUS is a generational project, and a deeply political one, which requires ongoing investment and leadership over many decades. Since the announcement of the pact, there have already been an astonishing four new British prime ministers, a new Australian prime minister, and a new American president. These electoral shifts have precipitated moments of strategic ambiguity – and even peril – for AUKUS, and have injected significant delays into the capacity of the three partners to advance their original objectives.

In addition to political disruption, all three systems have been plagued by the consequences of insufficient scrutiny, as the governments have chosen to heavily control public disclosures about AUKUS delivery progress. In the UK, AUKUS has rarely been the subject of focused debate in Parliament, with only a handful of general debates across both Houses, and the first major select committee inquiry only launched in 2025, four years after the announcement of the pact.³⁰ Healthy public debate plays a critical role in stress-testing

29 Jennifer Hewett, "Morrison Didn't Mention China – He Didn't Have To," *Australian Financial Review*, November 17, 2021, <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/morrison-didn-t-mention-china-he-didn-t-have-to-20211117-p59914>.

30 UK House of Commons Defence Committee, *AUKUS* [HC 841] (UK Parliament, 2026), <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmdfence/841/report.html>.

policy decisions and refining strategic thinking.³¹ Its absence increases the likelihood of blind spots in delivery, including underestimated costs and capability gaps, and the tendency for institutions to be motivated towards overreliance on optimistic projections. Without continual critical engagement, policy risks becoming insulated from necessary correction, thereby weakening its long-term effectiveness.³²

The absence of adequate public scrutiny has increased the likelihood that any incoming government that takes stewardship of AUKUS will be compelled to conduct an independent review of the pact, so it can be assessed on its merits as well as its alignment with its political narratives and policy priorities. It is entirely reasonable for a new national leader to conduct a review of a project of this scale when entering office, but it will not be feasible to build long-term certainty around an endeavour such as AUKUS during a time of ingrained political instability, if every single new leader must do the same. Efforts must therefore be invested in building greater strategic support and engagement with AUKUS among opposition parties and the wider public, recognising that the understandable pitfalls of disclosure are also necessary investments in its long-term resilience.

³¹ J. Mueller, "Public Opinion, the Media, and War," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media*, ed. G. C. Edwards et al. (Oxford Academic, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhnb/9780199545636.003.0041>).

³² R. K. Betts, "Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2007): 189–198.

Part Two: Resilience Tests and Challenges across AUKUS Partner Nations

Australia: Elite Polarisation and Contested Legitimacy

The resilience of major strategic agreements such as AUKUS depends not only on their military or geopolitical logic, but also on the depth of their democratic foundations.³³ The challenges in projecting meaningful, accurate and resilient political narratives around AUKUS have presented obstacles to securing public consent for the pact, particularly in Australia where the necessary investments dwarf those of the other partners. The narrative and institutional hurdles experienced in Australia – as the linchpin nation whose security needs drove the original project conception – are of particular significance to the future of AUKUS.

Overall, Pillar I has largely secured bipartisan political support between the two major Australian parliamentary parties, having been incorporated into the nation's long-term defence planning, and with new institutional structures created to oversee its delivery.³⁴ The AUKUS programme has also been linked to broader national objectives, including industrial development and workforce transformation, which have elevated the pact to the status of a central organising principle of Australia's future defence posture. Yet this depth of institutional commitment contrasts with more limited success in fostering a depth of public understanding and engagement necessary to sustain an initiative that will be repeatedly tested by both domestic and geopolitical forces. While the Australian government has effectively framed the pact as essential to national security, particularly in light of China's growing assertiveness and the deteriorating regional security environment, it has been less successful in encouraging informed public debate about its costs, risks and trade-offs. As a result, public support is currently relatively robust,³⁵ but is also shallow in nature and potentially volatile.³⁶

The legitimacy of Pillar I in Australia has already been challenged by the impression in public debate of elite polarisation, with persistent and substantive criticism dominating public commentary against limited institutional interventions. Prominent voices – including those of former political leaders, defence analysts and non-proliferation advocates – have questioned whether nuclear-powered submarines represent the most appropriate capability for Australia's strategic

33 For example, R. R. Krebs et al., "Fixing the Meaning of 9/11: Hegemony, Coercion, and the Road to War in Iraq," *Security Studies* 16, no. 3 (2007): 409–451.

34 *AUKUS Agreement*. (Australian Government Australian Submarine Agency, n.d.), <https://www.asa.gov.au/aucus-agreement>.

35 Charles Lyons-Jones, *Lowy Institute Poll* (Lowy Institute 2026), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/2026-lowy-institute-poll>.

36 The Australia Institute, "Two-Thirds of Australians Want a Review of AUKUS While Less than Half Think It Will Make Us Safer," *The Australia Institute*, May 22, 2023, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/two-thirds-of-australians-want-a-review-of-aucus-while-less-than-half-think-it-will-make-us-safer-poll/>; Alice Nason, "The Overlooked Outcome: AUKUS and the Australia–UK Partnership," *United States Studies Centre*, July 11, 2024, <https://www.usssc.edu.au/the-overlooked-outcome-aucus-and-the-australia-uk-partnership>.

needs.³⁷ The government has not been successful in persuading many citizens and elites of the distinct, long-term utility of nuclear submarines, which provide essential reach and endurance, in an era in which technological development cycles are hastening dramatically.³⁸ The introduction of nuclear technology, even in a non-weapons context, has generated debate about regulatory capacity, safety and Australia's longstanding non-nuclear identity. Others have focused on the enormous projected funding requirements and the opportunity costs for other areas of defence and public spending.³⁹ In June 2026, it was announced that Peter Garrett, an environmental activist, former minister and frontman of the Midnight Oil band, would lead a crowd-funded community "inquiry" into AUKUS, which will consider both the value-for-money and the nuclear dimensions of the pact, among other contentious areas.⁴⁰

Much of the public debate around AUKUS in Australia, however, has centred on the role it plays in deepening the nation's defence integration with the US, and the implications of this choice for its sovereignty and strategic autonomy.⁴¹ These concerns have understandably flourished in periods in which America has appeared to act as a more transactional or unpredictable partner.⁴² While the Australian government has at times publicly challenged actions of the second Trump administration,⁴³ it has refused to engage with the more emotional elements of the debate around the future of the alliance. It has also failed to sufficiently detail the reality of the tremendous costs involved should Australia wish to diminish the role of the US in its vital defences.⁴⁴ In the short term, this has resulted in a relentless stream of criticism about the US-Australia alliance, with no meaningful institutional response.⁴⁵ In a future crisis scenario, especially one involving China, this lack of prior discussion could lead to public unease or opposition if Australians perceive themselves as being drawn into conflicts without clear democratic consent.⁴⁶

Given these structural risks, it can be difficult to understand why the Australian government has enabled the relative marginalisation of the substantive contribution that Britain is making to building

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- 37 Tom McIlroy and Ben Doherty, "Aukus is Among Australia's Worst Foreign Policy Decisions and Requires 'Heroic' Optimism, Gareth Evans Says," *The Guardian*, June 11, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jun/11/aukus-among-australia-worst-foreign-policy-decisions-gareth-evans>; Elizabeth Buchanan and Richard Dunley, "Is Australia's AUKUS Submarine Pathway Really 'Optimal'?" *United States Studies Centre*, June 18, 2024, <https://www.usssc.edu.au/is-australias-aukus-submarine-pathway-really-optimal>; Lowy Institute, "The AUKUS Stress Test: Alliance Pressures and Australia's Strategic Choices," *The Interpreter*, July 29, 2025, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/debate/aukus-stress-test-alliance-pressures-australia-s-strategic-choices>.
- 38 Karen Elphick, *The Deterrence Advantage of Nuclear-powered Submarines in a Contested Indo-Pacific* (Parliament of Australia, 2025), https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/Research/Research_Papers/2024-25/The_deterrence_advantage_of_nuclear_powered_submarines.
- 39 Morgan Rees, "Built on 'Hopes and Dreams': AUKUS and the Future of Australian Foreign Policy," *QUT Real Focus*, May 10, 2023, <https://www.qut.edu.au/news/realfocus/built-on-hopes-and-dreams-aukus-and-the-future-of-australian-foreign-policy>.
- 40 Tom McIlroy, "Garrett to Head Independent Inquiry into the AUKUS Submarine Pact," *The Guardian*, June 2, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jun/02/peter-garrett-to-head-independent-inquiry-into-the-aukus-submarine-pact>.
- 41 Martin Farrer and Daniel Hurst, "Aukus Pact Will Turn Australia into '51st State' of the US, Paul Keating Says," *The Guardian*, August 8, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/article/2024/aug/08/aukus-pact-will-turn-australia-into-51st-state-of-the-us-says-paul-keating>; Bec Strating, "Those Worried about Australia's Sovereignty under AUKUS Miss the Point. That Ship Has Sailed," *The Guardian*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/15/those-worried-about-australias-sovereignty-under-aukus-miss-the-point-that-ship-has-sailed>.
- 42 Yaroslav Trofimov, "Allies Fret over Trump Presidency as Authoritarian Axis Challenges U.S.-Led Order," *Wall Street Journal*, November 8, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/allies-fret-over-trump-presidency-as-authoritarian-axis-challenges-u-s-led-order-3f2d2cb9>.
- 43 Mikele Syron, "Albanese, Taylor Hit Back at Trump Tariff Threat as US Blasts 'Unacceptable' Failures," *SBS News*, June 4, 2026, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/australia-trump-tariff-threat-forced-labour/9q7aa3uhh>.
- 44 Daniel Hurst and Julian Borger, "Aukus: Nuclear Submarines Deal Will Cost Australia up to \$368bn," *The Guardian*, March 13, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/14/aukus-nuclear-submarines-australia-commits-substantial-funds-into-expanding-us-shipbuilding-capacity>.
- 45 See, for example: McIlroy, T., & Doherty, B. (June 11, 2026). *Ibid.*
- 46 Gosling, *Deterring at a Distance*.

Australia's nuclear-powered submarine capability. Britain's experience in designing, building and operating nuclear-powered submarines forms a core layer of the advanced industrial foundation upon which Australia's future fleet will be built. Britain is not simply a technological donor, but also a co-developer in the SSN-AUKUS programme, which is intended to be a shared class of submarines operated by both the UK and Australia.⁴⁷ This represents a level of integration that goes beyond transactional cooperation, and reflects a genuine industrial and strategic partnership, through which Britain is helping to construct, from the ground up, a sovereign Australian nuclear submarine capability. This material centrality has been obscured in public discourse by the dominant perception that AUKUS is primarily about deepening Australia's reliance on the US.

One reason for the opacity of Britain's role is that the most politically sensitive and symbolically powerful elements of Pillar I, such as the transfer of nuclear propulsion technology and the interim provision of Virginia-class submarines, are closely associated with the US. As these elements are seen as decisive in overcoming the most immediate barriers to Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, public attention has gravitated towards Washington as the key enabler. The UK's role, while structurally embedded in the long-term solution, appears less high-stakes or subject to political risk, and has therefore received less emphasis. This dynamic is reinforced by Australia's strategic culture, which has long been anchored in its alliance with the US, with the ANZUS framework conditioning both policymakers and the public to interpret major defence initiatives through a US-centric lens.⁴⁸

The idea of Australia deepening its alliance with the US is easily understood and widely resonant, whereas the UK's role in co-developing a new class of submarines involves complex industrial and technological dimensions, which are harder to communicate in a succinct manner. Institutional visibility further contributes to the imbalance, as the US maintains a significant and visible military presence in the Indo-Pacific – including regular rotations through Australia, communications and intelligence bases, and extensive joint exercises – which renders its role in Australia's defence tangible and immediate.⁴⁹ The UK, although increasing its engagement in the region, does not have the same level of day-to-day operational visibility, and its hard-power contributions to the region can feel more like discrete shows of force.⁵⁰ Consequently, Britain's contributions to AUKUS, however substantial, are perceived as more abstract and distant, reinforcing a skewed public understanding in which the most visible partner is assumed to be the most important, even when the underlying reality is more balanced.

This divergence between perception and reality narrows the Australian public's understanding of AUKUS, and diminishes the extent to which the nation's future capability is being shaped through a genuinely trilateral partnership. AUKUS is projected to cost hundreds of billions of dollars to the Australian taxpayer over several decades, representing

47 Ministry of Defence, Submarine Delivery Agency, and John Healey, "UK Submarine Arrives in Australia in AUKUS Partnership First, GOV.UK, February 23, 2026, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-submarine-arrives-in-australia-in-aukus-partnership-first>.

48 Michael J. Green, Peter J. Dean, Brendan Taylor, and Zack Cooper, *The ANZUS Alliance in an Ascending Asia* (Australian National University, 2015), <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2870868190>.

49 Hannah Middleton, "U.S. Bases in Australia," *Peace Review* 22, no. 2 (2010): 144–149, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402651003751388>.

50 Kelly Ng and Steve Lai, "UK Aircraft Carrier in Indo-Pacific on Rare Deployment," *BBC*, June 24, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2gp07yqnjo>.

one of the largest defence investments in Australian history.⁵¹ As it was conceived during a parliamentary term, AUKUS was not a central issue in electoral campaigns at the time of its announcement, which embeds a degree of inherent fragility in the form of a political argument about a democratic deficit that all subsequent leaders must confront. While the Australian government continues to hold a degree of advantage in shaping opinion due to its monopoly over access to intelligence and sensitive military assessments, the persistent pessimism about AUKUS from former officials and even prime ministers – regardless of their personal motivations – has eroded confidence and reduced AUKUS in the minds of many citizens to more of a discretionary political choice rather than a strategic necessity.⁵²

This creates fertile ground for political contestation, particularly if AUKUS becomes framed as diverting resources from domestic priorities, which could precipitate a more sustained public backlash or a weakening of its political mandate in future. Addressing these vulnerabilities requires a considerably more proactive and transparent communications strategy from the Commonwealth government than has hitherto been forthcoming. In the Australian case, therefore, the problem is not the absence of debate, but the absence of one that is sufficiently broad, balanced and reasoned to provide a robust democratic foundation.

The US: Political Turbulence and Narrative Realignment

In the US, Pillar I has achieved strong institutional integration, with particularly robust leadership being driven by the US Navy, congressional members, and the industry and other groups associated with the submarine industrial base.⁵³ AUKUS aligned closely with the strategic objectives of the Biden administration in the Indo-Pacific, and reinforced the force-multiplier framing it applied to alliance networks, both of which facilitated bipartisan support at congressional level.⁵⁴ The advancement of AUKUS was aided by the personal investment of the President and the focused attention of senior leaders in both the Pentagon and the State Department, which enabled the practical achievement of some of the most complex areas of institutional and legislative reform residing with the US, including ITAR.⁵⁵

However, AUKUS has always occupied a relatively low profile in American public discourse and has not become a major subject of political contestation or public debate. Consequently, the US government has not been incentivised to invest in promoting the concept to the wider population. While its low salience has helped shield the pact from a degree of politicisation in an era of hyper-polarisation, in which the concept of the national interest is

51 Ben Doherty, "Aukus Costs Balloon with More Cash and Staff for Submarine Agency amid Ongoing Search for Nuclear Waste Dump," *The Guardian*, May 12, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2026/may/12/australia-federal-budget-2026-aukus-submarines-nuclear-defence-spending>.

52 Tom Imlroy, "Peter Garrett to Head Independent Inquiry into the Aukus Submarine Pact," *The Guardian*, June 1, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jun/02/peter-garrett-to-head-independent-inquiry-into-the-aukus-submarine-pact>; Deborah Snow, "Battle Stations: The Former PM, Ministers, and Military Brass Cashing in on Australia's Defence Spending Bonanza," *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 2, 2025, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/battle-stations-the-former-pm-ministers-and-military-brass-cashing-in-on-australia-s-defence-spending-bonanza-20250729-p5miky.html>.

53 Ronald O'Rourke, *Navy Virginia-Class Submarine Program and AUKUS Submarine (Pillar One Project): Background and Issues for Congress*, (CONGRESS.GOV, 2026), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL32418>.

54 The White House, (2022, February). Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>

55 Clarke Cooper, "On the Third AUKUS Anniversary."

increasingly contested, it also means that the democratic anchoring of the AUKUS pact in the American context is relatively weak. One consequence of this lack of an expressed public mandate for AUKUS is that the pact has become extremely vulnerable to shifts in political leadership, especially during a period in which politicians claim to be more responsive to citizens at the expense of elites.⁵⁶

Upon the re-election of the second Trump administration, the commitment within the Optimal Pathway Agreement for the US to transfer stop-gap Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarines to Australia was immediately and publicly challenged, due to its perceived impact on American sovereign requirements.⁵⁷ The announcement that the Trump administration would undertake a root-and-branch review of AUKUS injected a high degree of ambiguity into the pact and brought progress on areas requiring high levels of political attention, such as Pillar II, to a relative halt. While both the UK and Australia had undertaken reviews through a sovereignty lens, there had been a sense that both reviews were focused on rewiring their respective systems to improve delivery outcomes, rather than calling into question the merits of the pact itself. In this environment, the sustainability of AUKUS depended in large part on persistent diplomatic representations, including from King Charles III, and continued confidence within Congress and the pressure it was able to uphold towards the US administration, amid concerns from the new leadership about the nation's industrial capacity and competing domestic priorities.⁵⁸

In the end, the Trump administration's AUKUS review recommended its continuation, with a new framing that gave a clear feeling of ownership to its current guardians.⁵⁹ Indeed, there was a story to tell about how the Biden administration, while deeply committed to AUKUS, had not embraced the pact's inherently disruptive elements with the kind of revolutionary zeal from which AUKUS could benefit, and which was more naturally associated with President Trump and his supporters. This enabled a narrative of renewal and reinvigoration, which aligned with the broader direction of the new administration's allied policy. The President appears to judge America's allies and partnerships against a practical test as to whether they strengthen American power, reduce America's warfighting and security burden, help to increase America's competitiveness, and deliver effectively in the vital domains of economic and military power.⁶⁰ For the UK and Australia, the best means of positioning AUKUS to Washington was therefore not to frame the pact as an abstract alliance of inherent virtue, but as a burden-sharing, industrial deterrence and delivery mechanism, which directly amplifies America's capacity to achieve its geopolitical objectives and strengthen its competitiveness towards its adversaries.

While the review concluded and was immediately reinforced by the first trilateral Defence Ministers' Meeting since President Trump's inauguration in December 2025, it took another six months for Pillar II

56 Thorsten Wojczewski, "Trump, Populism, and American Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 16, no. 3 (2020): 292–311, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26986394>.

57 Jack Detsch and Paul McLeary, "Pentagon to Review US Role in AUKUS Submarine Pact," *Politico*, June 11, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/06/11/pentagon-aukus-review-australia-britain-00401332>.

58 Bradley Martin, *United States Navy Force Structure: The Challenge of Global Crisis Response* [RR-A3294-1] (RAND Corporation, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR-A3294-1>.

59 Reuters, "US Says Pentagon Review Sees Opportunities to Strengthen AUKUS Submarine Deal," *Reuters*, December 4, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/pentagons-aukus-review-finds-opportunities-put-deal-strongest-possible-footing-2025-12-04/>.

60 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (The White House, 2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>; Marco Rubio, "Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the Munich Security Conference," *U.S. Department of State*, February 14, 2026, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/02/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-at-the-munich-security-conference>.

to receive an official blessing and for the first “Signature Project” to be identified.⁶¹ Overall, the change in government had led to an 18-month delay on many areas of AUKUS progress, also affecting the capacity of both the UK and Australia to move forward on crucial decisions.

The rationale for America’s involvement in AUKUS has only strengthened since the pact’s conception. Yet as the US continues to become further entrenched in a political culture of existential stakes, and the once-bipartisan issue of defence becomes entangled with oppositional partisan identities, it should be assumed that future governments will continue to conduct such reviews and that this will infuse an embedded degree of fragility into AUKUS as a political project. Focused attention on cultivating public and congressional awareness and engagement with AUKUS as a beacon of America’s productive alliances would provide the best means of balancing this inherent instability and securing greater resilience for the pact into the future.

UK: Institutional Barriers to Strategic Momentum

The trajectory of AUKUS in the UK echoes several elements of the experience in the US and Australia; however, the fundamentally distinct incentives and structural pressures at play drive a unique set of risks. As in Australia, Pillar I has been effectively integrated into defence and industrial policy planning, reflecting its importance for sustaining and advancing the country’s submarine-building capabilities, albeit without the political leadership required to maximise its opportunities.⁶² As in the US, AUKUS has had limited visibility in domestic public discourse. It has not emerged as a significant political issue, and there has been relatively little effort made to engage the broader public with its implications beyond the set-piece photo opportunities of the sporadic trilateral Defence Ministers’ Meetings.

These concomitant factors have allowed the British government to proceed with minimal opposition to the pact, relying on the established defence consensus and the incremental progress of the submarine industrial machinery. Yet this has also meant that there have been few levers with which to hold government accountable for its delivery, that public ownership of the project is limited, and that its legitimacy is largely confined to elite and specialist communities.⁶³ The story of AUKUS in the British context is therefore less shrouded in questions of fundamental resilience, and is more about squandered opportunities due to low ambitions and the pact’s disconnection from other relevant policy priorities.

The UK’s most urgent challenge pertaining to AUKUS resides in its institutional performance, which reflects structural factors, including cultural barriers linked to the foundations of its objectives. The initial framing of AUKUS was predicated on several concepts which represented an element of departure from established British doctrine. While efforts have been made to socialise these arguments throughout departments, their nascency and the challenge they posed to embedded priorities has necessitated their ongoing reinforcement.

61 Tessa Wong, “US, UK and Australia to Develop Underwater Drone Technology,” *BBC*, May 30, 2026, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y8wjvd1ypo>.

62 House of Commons Defence Committee, *AUKUS: Eighth Report of Session 2024–26 (HC 841)* (UK Parliament, 2026), <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmdfence/841/report.html>.

63 See, for example, the evidence cited in the House of Commons Defence Committee’s inquiry regarding the lack of British public engagement. UK House of Commons Defence Committee, *AUKUS*.

AUKUS therefore provides a lens through which to examine the success and failure of narratives in British defence and security policy, which evidently depends not only on the intellectual coherence of the proposal itself, but on whether it can be absorbed into the institutional structures responsible for its implementation.⁶⁴

History suggests that institutions are often most willing to adopt new doctrines when changing international circumstances expose the inadequacy of existing strategic assumptions. For example, during the Cold War, the UK's defence and foreign policy institutions were structured around the long-term threat posed by the Soviet Union, and this strategic orientation became deeply institutionalised because the threat was clear, sustained and widely accepted across all parts of government.⁶⁵ Similarly, following the September 11 terror attacks, counterterrorism rapidly assumed prominence in British security institutions, and drove their expansion, as it became a central organising principle of national security policy.⁶⁶ In these cases, doctrine aligned with a widely recognised shift in the strategic environment, which made institutional adaptation appear both necessary and legitimate.

By contrast, doctrines tend to fail to gain institutional purchase when they emerge primarily as political narratives rather than responses to clearly defined strategic realities, or where they are vague and ill-defined. It is also essential that sufficient resources be devoted to signal the significance of the doctrines within the suite of the Prime Minister's political priorities, as institutions immediately recognise the gap between ambition and the willingness to make hard choices towards delivery. Yet even with both resources and strategic clarity, doctrines can be adopted without endurance if they fail to become embedded in bureaucratic routines, and it is therefore necessary for doctrines to adapt practical processes and coordination functions if they are to take hold.⁶⁷ Underlying many of these factors is therefore the deterministic role of institutional culture, which shapes whether strategic ideas and new policy frameworks are perceived as legitimate, and the extent to which the Civil Service is willing to alter established practices in its implementation.⁶⁸

Policy institutions are not neutral delivery mechanisms that simply implement political directives. They possess deeply embedded norms, ideologies and historical memories, which shape their responses to new ideas.⁶⁹ New foreign, defence and security initiatives such as AUKUS must earn the support of departments with vastly different incentives and strategic cultures. For example, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) has traditionally valued diplomatic expertise and cautious statecraft, which may therefore incite resistance to doctrines that are disruptive or accelerant in nature. The Ministry of Defence is shaped by service traditions, threat management and operational pragmatism.

64 C. P. Thomson et al., "A Very British National Security State: Formal and Informal Institutions in the Design of UK Security Policy," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 20, no. 3 (2018): 573–593.

65 O. Daddow, "Global Britain: The Discursive Construction of Britain's Post-Brexit World Role," *Global Affairs* 5, no. 1 (2019): 5–22; R. G. Whitman, "The UK and EU Foreign, Security and Defence Policy after Brexit: Integrated, Associated or Detached?" *National Institute Economic Review* 238, no. 1 (2016): R43–R50.

66 For example, Cabinet Office and National Security and Intelligence, *The National Security Strategy – A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty* (GOV.UK, 2010), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-national-security-strategy-a-strong-britain-in-an-age-of-uncertainty>.

67 Alex Thomas, Rhys Clyne, Madeleine Bishop, and Alice Lilly, *A New Statutory Role for the Civil Service* (Institute for Government, 2022), <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/new-statutory-role-civil-service.pdf>.

68 Air Vice-Marshal Fin Monahan, *Military Culture and Fighting Power* (King's College London, 2023), <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/warstudies/assets/paper-17-fin-monahan-military-culture-and-fighting-power-v2.pdf>.

69 E. H. Schein and P. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 6th ed. (Wiley, 2021).

The Treasury has historically acted as a powerful constraint on expansive strategic and political ambitions by prioritising fiscal discipline and restraint. All three departments are shaped by historical memory, with past strategic failures continuing to cast a shadow over contemporary policy planning. While historical memory can function as a protective mechanism, preventing repeated strategic errors in a resource-constrained environment, it can also foster a degree of excessive conservatism which inhibits necessary adaptation and suppresses risk-tolerance.

AUKUS was announced in the context of Britain's departure from the European Union, a radical act which simultaneously encouraged both political risk-taking and institutional conservatism. Brexit precipitated a new assessment of the nation's role in the world,⁷⁰ presenting a rare opportunity for the government to pursue a scorched-earth approach in a policy domain often characterised by continuity and assumed priorities. Although the analysis that resulted in the concept of the Indo-Pacific tilt was institutional, it was also politically convenient for a government that needed positive stories to tell about Britain's post-Brexit future within its global Britain framing.⁷¹ There has been much misunderstanding about the Indo-Pacific tilt and its intentions, particularly insofar as it was often regarded by sceptics as a hard-power exercise denying the realities of Britain's geography.⁷² In fact, the tilt was largely constituted by the motivation to develop deeper economic and trade relationships in the region, as well as a more strategic and collaborative emphasis on development and diplomacy, and regulatory and standard-setting opportunities.⁷³ Alongside the Global Combat Air Programme project seeded with Italy and Japan, and commitments to send a full carrier strike group deployment through the Indo-Pacific, AUKUS was intended to do much of the heavy lifting of the defence and security elements of the tilt.

Despite support from the Prime Minister and senior ministers, the Indo-Pacific tilt remained a controversial proposal within and outside government, being subject to constant challenge due to the perception that the investments it demanded were at the expense of commensurate investments in the Euro-Atlantic, Britain's home region.⁷⁴ Only two months after AUKUS was announced, Russia's troop build-up along the Ukrainian border began to gain momentum, and British and American officials frantically presented conclusive intelligence about President Putin's intentions to sceptical European allies.⁷⁵ The UK government shifted dramatically to adapt to the urgent needs of Ukrainian defence, with the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary and Foreign Secretary all throwing personal political weight behind the need for a robust show of force.⁷⁶ While it was undoubtedly

70 Daddow, "Global Britain," 5–22.

71 See, for example, Cabinet Office, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (GOV.UK, 2021), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review>.

72 R. G. Whitman, "The UK's Indo-Pacific Tilt: Strategic Rationale and Limitations," *International Affairs* 97, no. 5 (2021): 1537–1554.

73 Thomas Wilkins, "'Tilting' the Balance? An Evaluation of Britain's Strategic Approach to the Indo-Pacific," *International Relations* 45, no. 5 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121231195605>.

74 Scott Edwards and Robert Yates, "The Empire Has No Clothes? The UK, the Indo-Pacific 'Tilt', and Bargaining Towards a Southeast Asian Role [L'empire n'a pas d'habits ? Le Royaume-Uni, le « tournant » vers la zone indopacifique et la négociation d'un rôle en Asie du Sud-Est]," *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* 29, no. XXIX-1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.4000/rfcb.11742>.

75 Gustafson, K., Lomas, D., Wagner, S., Abdalla, N. S., & Davies, P. H. J. (2024). Intelligence warning in the Ukraine war, Autumn 2021 – Summer 2022. *Intelligence and National Security*, 39(3), 400–419. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2024.2322214>

76 Boris Johnson, *Prime Minister's Address to the Nation on the Russian Invasion of Ukraine* (GOV.UK, 2022), <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-address-to-the-nation-on-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-24-february-2022>

the correct decision for Britain to assume a prominent leadership role in Ukraine's defence and devote significant resources towards this goal, the timing was unfortunate for AUKUS, which lost its best opportunity for immediate strategic momentum.

AUKUS presents an interesting case of doctrinal maladaptation precisely because it has not failed completely, but rather has struggled to achieve broad institutional purchase beyond relatively narrow defence-industrial, naval and technological communities. AUKUS entered a strategic ecosystem already dominated by older and more deeply embedded commitments. British defence institutions remain structurally oriented towards NATO, European security and the transatlantic relationship;⁷⁷ the war in Ukraine rendered concerns about territorial defence in Europe, NATO readiness, force modernisation, and munitions production far more urgent for the Ministry of Defence than broader strategic considerations pertaining to the international order. While AUKUS was framed around long-term competition in the Indo-Pacific, many officials viewed European security as the more immediate, and appropriate, challenge for Britain to confront. As a result, AUKUS was often treated as important, but not central. It was subsumed into British defence policy as another layer on top of extensive previous commitments, without dislodging other priorities, which encouraged its concentration within specific communities rather than affording the pact a shaping role in the strategic architecture of government.

That the Indo-Pacific tilt maintained as much momentum as it did under these circumstances reflects the strength of the argument underpinning the logic to deepen Britain's purview and relationships in an economically and militarily dynamic region. AUKUS was also reinforced by the increasing awareness in the Ministry of Defence and Cabinet Office of China's adversarial capabilities, which had been under intensified scrutiny since Washington had advocated for the withdrawal of Huawei from the UK's telecommunications network.⁷⁸ However, the need to assume a more robust security posture towards China revealed the impact that distinct incentives between departments could have on the adoption of new policy frameworks. Russia's adversarial nature was accepted by all parts of government because the evidence was strong and sustained, the analysis was shared among many of the UK's allies, and the costs of this assessment were relatively limited due to the generally modest nature of Russia's economic strength.⁷⁹ China presented a distinct problem as a "systemic challenge", with considerably more entangled economic relationships, and a preference for acts of malign interference and intrusion outside the traditional contours of kinetic warfare.⁸⁰ This produced diverse risk assessments among the UK's allies and multiple considerations within the British government.⁸¹

The Huawei decision followed both the UK's vote to leave the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States on a protectionist platform, meaning the UK was

⁷⁷ UK Government, *Russian Invasion of Ukraine: UK Government Response* (GOV.UK, 2022), <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/russian-invasion-of-ukraine-uk-government-response>.

⁷⁸ Conrad Prince and James Sullivan, "The UK's New Way on Huawei," *Royal United Services Institute*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/uks-new-way-huawei>.

⁷⁹ Lawrence Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁸⁰ Cabinet Office, *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World* (GOV.UK, 2023), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world>.

⁸¹ Abigaël Vasselier and Tara Varma, "How Should Europe Position Itself for Systemic Rivalry with China?" *Brookings*, December 5, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-should-europe-position-itself-for-systemic-rivalry-with-china/>.

already facing the injection of friction into its two largest trading relationships. In this context, the prospect of de-risking from another major trading partner with a track record of engaging in retaliatory economic warfare was daunting for the Treasury.⁸² There were also areas of internal discord inherent in the debates about how Britain's geopolitical choices constituted a narrative framework for its post-Brexit outward-facing identity and fundamental differences in the assessments about how best to defend the country's global interests.⁸³ In particular, whether Whitehall should anticipate an inevitable shift towards the multipolarity of economic and military power, or whether it should partner with the US to retain its hegemonic influence. The multipolarity doctrine posited that not only was Britain declining in relevance and power, but that the wider Western alliance was becoming a historical relic.⁸⁴ Its advocates argued that Britain should therefore ruthlessly pursue relationship with so-called middle powers in Africa, the Middle East and Asia.⁸⁵

The FCDO has historically prioritised diplomatic flexibility and is often cautious about pursuing frameworks that appear overly rigid, which meant it was incentivised to focus more on a wider programme of global alliance-building to balance China's rise, rather than directly prosecute a challenge.⁸⁶ AUKUS was interpreted in some parts of government as highly securitised and heavily aligned with strategic competition with China.⁸⁷ It was also regarded as an Anglosphere initiative, which some consider to be an anachronistic construct imbued with passive xenophobia, misplaced nostalgia and colonial sensibilities.⁸⁸ The preponderance of this mindset was undoubtedly strengthened by the merger of the UK's international development department into the Foreign Office, with thousands of employees who had been hitherto focused on humanitarian issues thrust into the epicentre of Britain's geostrategic planning.⁸⁹ While Australia is of course an increasingly important economic and strategic actor on the global stage, it was not truly captured within the middle powers doctrine, as it was seen first and foremost as a member of the Anglosphere, and, by prominent foreign policy voices, as a symbolic representation of the pro-Brexit campaigners' denial of the UK's geographic interests over a more European characterisation of identity and alignment.⁹⁰

The foundations of AUKUS lay in the high degree of cultural congruence between the three nations; the British people have consistently identified the greatest degree of favourability towards

82 James Landale, "Huawei Decision Part of Wider Strategic Tensions with China," *BBC*, July 13, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-53366301>; Naoise McDonagh, "Hidden Lessons from China's Coercion Campaign against Australia," *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, July 27, 2023, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/hidden-lessons-from-chinas-coercion-campaign-against-australia/>.

83 Daddow, "Global Britain," 5–22.

84 Amitav Acharya, *The Decline of the West and the Rise of 'the Rest' Will Lead to a New World Order* (The World Today, Chatham House, 2025), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2025-09/decline-west-and-rise-rest-will-lead-new-world-order>; Walt, S. M. (2011). The End of the American Era. *The National Interest*, (116), 6–16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42896410>.

85 D. Roberts and N. Lamp, "Power Shifts and Middle Powers," *International Affairs* 97, no. 5 (2021): 1479–1496.

86 C. Hill and S. Beadle, "Britain's Diplomatic Institutions after Brexit," *International Affairs* 95, no. 6 (2019): 1399–1415.

87 W. T. Tow and M. J. Green, "AUKUS and Indo-Pacific Strategic Alignment," *The Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (2022): 7–25.

88 S. Vucetic, "Anglosphere: Continuity, Disjuncture and Location," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 23, no. 1 (2021): 131–146.

89 Joe Devanny et al., "The Conservative Party and DFID: Party Statecraft and Development Policy since 1997," *Contemporary British History* 36, no. 1 (2022): 86–123, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13619462.2021.1969232>.

90 Nick Bisley, "The Quad, AUKUS and Australian Security Minilateralism: China's Rise and New Approaches to Security Cooperation," *Journal of Contemporary China* 34, no. 154 (2025): 564–576, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2365241>.

Anglosphere nations as security and economic partners.⁹¹ Yet the middle powers and multipolarity frameworks demanded a more pluralistic posture, which presented rhetorical challenges that were never fully resolved. There were also reasonable questions being asked in the aftermath of the first Trump administration in which the US had assumed a new conception of its national interest about the long-term resilience of the UK–US partnership, which emboldened those advocating for the UK to accept multipolarity as an unavoidable reality, and positioned the special relationship as a symbolic construct without enduring utility.⁹² In short, AUKUS came up against institutional concerns about Britain putting its sovereign eggs in the wrong geopolitical basket, while also being hamstrung by a perception of being simply unfashionable. While the Ministry of Defence was the driving department responsible for delivering AUKUS, the debates within the FCDO and the Treasury around the assumptions that underpinned its conception played a major deterministic role in its uneven integration into the UK's strategic doctrine.

It may appear trivial to discuss these observations about narrative and conceptual preferences, which cannot always be measured nor fully evidenced. However, it is essential to capture the degree to which AUKUS found itself at the epicentre of several forces of strategic and rhetorical contestation within the UK government – debates that have perpetuated and metastasised under the ensuing changes of political leadership following the General Election in 2024.⁹³ There are worthy questions to be asked about the discordance of mindsets and policy preferences between the different departments involved in the strategic advancement of British foreign policy, and the impacts that this has on effective communication and delivery. AUKUS ultimately struggled to gain broad institutional purchase in the UK because it was introduced into a system already heavily shaped by older strategic commitments, budgetary constraints, institutional cultures and competing threat perceptions. Rather than becoming a central organising principle of British defence and security policy, it became layered onto existing structures, and largely contained within specialised bureaucratic and industrial silos. AUKUS was formally recognised, but not informally embraced.⁹⁴ At the heart of these challenges is the failure to craft a narrative for AUKUS and its role in the UK's wider geopolitical posture that could overcome the internal barriers to such a disruptive and novel project.

91 Dylan Difford, *Who do Britons See as the UK's Allies and Enemies?* (YouGov, 2024), <https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/50803-who-do-britons-see-as-the-uks-allies-and-enemies>.

92 See, for example, James Schneider, "The Special Relationship Is Dead," *New Statesman*, January 21, 2026, <https://www.newstatesman.com/international-politics/2026/01/the-special-relationship-is-dead>; Chris Featherstone, "Britain Should Welcome the Death of the Special Relationship," *The Critic*, April 10, 2025, <https://thecritic.co.uk/britain-should-welcome-the-death-of-the-special-relationship/>.

93 John Curtis, *The UK's Tilt to the Indo-Pacific and What's Next for Its Policy to the Region* [Research Briefing CBP-10052] (House of Commons Library, 2025), <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10052/CBP-10052.pdf>; William Choong and Eugene Tan, "The UK and the Indo-Pacific: The Need to Lean into the Tilt," *Royal United Services Institute*, September 19, 2024, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/uk-and-indo-pacific-need-lean-tilt>.

94 British security policy has historically relied on both informal and formal adoption to succeed. See, for example, Thomson, "A Very British National Security State," 573–593.

Part Three: Reframing and Integrating AUKUS into Britain's Strategic Doctrine

With the pact's current three governments having renewed their commitments to AUKUS, there is an urgent opportunity to reframe it and redress the institutional challenges that have produced obstacles to its success over the past five years. In particular, the UK government must evolve from its established position of approaching AUKUS as a narrow Indo-Pacific submarine programme with a handful of tacked-on advanced capability programmes, and instead present the pact as a driving propulsion and instrument vital to the UK's strategic posture.

AUKUS should be understood firstly as a force multiplier for Euro-Atlantic maritime deterrence and power projection in the Arctic, North Atlantic and the High North; secondarily as a growth and innovation platform for dual-use advanced technology in the UK's knowledge economy; thirdly, as a template for modern alliance-building across our two priority theatres.

The UK's recent strategic planning documents have demonstrated considerable congruence with this positioning, and yet the absence of vital connective tissue between these objectives means that AUKUS itself has not been sufficiently integrated into the government's policy framework and tactical outlook. This moment of fundamental project recalibration, as the Trump administration orients its focus towards AUKUS, should not be missed.

Maritime Dominance in the Arctic, North Atlantic and the High North

The first reframing of AUKUS that must take place is regional. AUKUS is not only an Indo-Pacific venture, but an enabler of Atlantic and Arctic deterrence and force projection. The demands of the war in Ukraine have necessitated the reassertion of the Euro-Atlantic as the UK's home region,⁹⁵ and have created a political imperative to present the project as part of the strategic bridge between the theatres. This linkage has been emphasised firstly in the Strategic Defence Review,⁹⁶ which explained that the future fleet would be involved in patrolling the North Atlantic and supporting autonomous systems and undersea advantage, and secondly in the public statements made around the Defence Ministers' Meetings since 2024. Nonetheless, AUKUS remains positioned internally as a component of the UK's maritime strategy and tied up with the political narratives of the Indo-Pacific tilt, rather than a driving principle behind the pursuit of maritime dominance.

⁹⁵ R. G. Whitman, "The Indo-Pacific Tilt after Ukraine," *International Affairs* 99, no. 4 (2023): 1523–1542.

⁹⁶ Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Defence Review 2025 – Making Britain Safer, Secure at Home, Strong Abroad* (GOV.UK, 2025), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-strategic-defence-review-2025-making-britain-safer-secure-at-home-strong-abroad>.

The rhetorical groundwork for this reframing has begun to be laid. The Strategic Defence Review published in 2025 places the new hybrid navy, SSN-AUKUS, autonomous systems and North Atlantic operations at the heart of future force design.⁹⁷ The National Security Strategy⁹⁸ and the Defence Industrial Strategy,⁹⁹ also published in 2025, both tie security investments to dividends of job creation, industrial capacity, skills and technology adoption. More recently, in response to its increasing geopolitical significance, the UK government has increased its emphasis on the Arctic and High North as a priority region, committing to double troop deployments to Norway over three years, sending the HMS Prince of Wales aircraft carrier for NATO exercises, participating in NATO's Arctic Sentry planning, and pledging to enhanced Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) activity in the High North.¹⁰⁰ These developments create an opening to anchor AUKUS at the heart of an adaptive British doctrine, rather than to reinforce its current position as a parallel, siloed, allied defence delivery project.

Pillar I affords the UK a stronger industrial and operational basis for sustaining a larger, more modern nuclear-powered submarine (SSN) force. The UK government has committed the UK to build up to 12 SSN-AUKUS boats, backed by continual production and heavy investment in the Barrow and Derby industrial sites.¹⁰¹ For the North Atlantic and High North, that capability uplift would facilitate persistent undersea surveillance, anti-submarine warfare, sea denial, the escorting of strategic assets, and the protection of critical seabed infrastructure and sea lines of communication. However, Pillar II can also make important contributions to the UK's maritime power strategy, through innovation focused on autonomous systems, seabed warfare and deployable unmanned capabilities from submarines.¹⁰² Recent UK defence innovation activity has explicitly connected naval testbeds and autonomous payloads to Pillar II objectives, especially for covert surveillance, intelligence and seabed missions, and the announcement of the first Pillar II "Signature Project" in May 2026 is a meaningful step forward in connecting the narratives of the two Pillars around a maritime framework.¹⁰³ However, it should be emphasised that this is not confined to the Indo-Pacific region. In practical terms, these efforts are directly relevant to the UK's role in the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap, North Atlantic reinforcement routes, offshore energy security, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) operations.¹⁰⁴

There are several tangible ways in which AUKUS can become more deeply embedded in the UK's Northern posture. Firstly, AUKUS should be described as part of the undersea deterrence architecture that secures the North Atlantic approaches and directly defends the UK homeland, not merely as a contribution to regional security

97 Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Defence Review 2025*.

98 UK Government, *National Security Strategy 2025* (GOV.UK, 2025), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/685ab0da72588f418862075c/E03360428_National_Security_Strategy_Accessible.pdf.

99 UK Government, *Defence Industrial Strategy* (GOV.UK, 2025), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-industrial-strategy-2025-making-defence-an-engine-for-growth>.

100 Claire Mills, John Curtis, Louisa Brooke-Holland, Nuala Burnett, and Paul Bolton, *UK Defence: Renewed Interest in the Arctic* [Research Briefing CBP-10262] (House of Commons Library, 2026), <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10262/>.

101 UK Prime Minister's Office, *10 Downing Street*. (March 13, 2023).

102 Andrew N. Liaropoulos, "Autonomous Weapon Systems and the Future of Wars," in *Cyber Security in the Age of Artificial Intelligence and Autonomous Weapons*, ed. Mehmet Emin Erendor (Routledge, 2026), 134–144, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/384465473>.

103 Ministry of Defence and John Healey, "Cutting-Edge Underwater Tech for AUKUS Forces to Be Developed through Landmark Partnership," *GOV.UK*, May 30, 2026, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cutting-edge-underwater-tech-for-aukus-forces-to-be-developed-through-landmark-partnership>.

104 Shane Ward, "The GIUK Gap: A New Age of A2/AD in Contested Strategic Maritime Spaces," *Next Generation Nuclear Network*, September 12, 2024, <https://nuclearnetwork.csis.org/the-giuk-gap-a-new-age-of-a2-ad-in-contested-strategic-maritime-spaces/>; "The GIUK Gap's Strategic Significance," *Strategic Comments* 25, no. 8 (2019): i–iii, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2019/the-giuk-gaps-strategic-significance/>.

balancing initiatives in the geographically distant Indo-Pacific. Secondly, it should be seen as a hybrid maritime system, with the SSN-AUKUS submarines of Pillar I sitting alongside Pillar II capabilities such as autonomous or unmanned underwater vehicles, AI-enabled ISR, long-range strike, undersea communications resilience and seabed protection. Thirdly, the UK should consistently articulate that AUKUS strengthens NATO's Northern deterrence posture by improving undersea mass, interoperability, industrial resilience and technology insertion. AUKUS can also be integrated with the UK's responsibilities as the lead of the JEF,¹⁰⁵ and its deepening relationship with Norway and other Nordic powers, with greater alignment across JEF experimentation, Northern exercises and NATO regional planning.

While the UK government began to make this case in several public speeches in 2026, AUKUS continues to sit outside the core of its NATO planning, and the teams responsible for its advancement remain dislocated from the centrifugal force of its wider defence posture. The AUKUS submarine industrial project is overseen by senior officials with cross-programmatic responsibilities, yet there is scarce overlap between civil servants with tangible expertise in AUKUS and those leading Britain's wider Euro-Atlantic strategic posture. There is a considerable difference between retrofitting AUKUS to existing programmes and priorities to secure its longevity, and recognising that it is an instrument to achieve Britain's deepest and most vital goals, and therefore ensuring it is embedded in the very fabric of Britain's strategic and industrial planning.

An Advanced Technology Engine for a Knowledge Economy

One of the strongest domestic cases for AUKUS in Britain pertains to its role as a national innovation and industrial integration mechanism. Britain is a highly successful knowledge and service-based economy, and advanced technologies are increasingly pulling away from the rest of the economy in their rapid growth and expansion.¹⁰⁶ While it is clear that there are several industrial areas of core manufacturing and domestic competencies that must be reinstated, it is highly unlikely that Britain's fundamental economic structure will shift in the immediate decades to come. This creates both an opportunity and a necessity to focus on the foundational elements of innovation as the building blocks of growth, and to better integrate advanced research and development across both the commercial and defence domains.

There is already an established case to be made about the contribution of Pillar I to both the regional and national economies, with the expansion of the submarine industrial base supporting the creation of thousands of skilled jobs, deepening long-term industrial capacity, and building sustained submarine-related demand across a complex and regionally dispersed supply chain.¹⁰⁷ However, the significant potential contribution of Pillar II to Britain's knowledge economy has yet to be sufficiently articulated. AUKUS can become

¹⁰⁵ Jason C. Moyer, "The UK-Led Joint Expeditionary Force's Impact on Northern European Security," *Wilson Center*, October 18, 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/microsite/8/node/124378>.

¹⁰⁶ Daniel Garcia-Macia et al., "Tracing Productivity Growth Channels in the UK," *Research Policy* 54, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2024.105149>.

¹⁰⁷ Daniel Hurst, "Australia to Spend £1.9bn in UK as AUKUS Funding Boosts Rolls-Royce and Submarine Jobs," *The Guardian*, March 25, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/25/australia-aukus-funding-uk-jobs-rolls-royce>.

an organising principle and demand signal for an unprecedented era of innovation across a wide range of vital advanced technologies in which Britain holds clear strengths, including AI, autonomy, sensing, cyber security, quantum and undersea technologies. Specifically, with the appropriate government levers and sufficient political attention, AUKUS can be harnessed as part of wider sovereign capability efforts to build a resilient national innovation workforce and talent pipeline, supporting a flourishing start-up ecosystem, and driving private financing into both the defence and technology sectors.¹⁰⁸ Delivering on AUKUS will require the British state to address many current deficiencies and obstacles to national potential, and, if successful, would help to drive an engine of growth in a contested period that will define its future.

The UK government should come to understand AUKUS as the defence-tech spine of a national knowledge economy strategy, with several mutually reinforcing layers. This requires the development of a cohesive AUKUS workforce plan, encompassing dedicated programmes for apprenticeships, doctoral training, nuclear skills, software engineering, materials science and advanced manufacturing pipelines across the UK. This should be complemented by a scholarship programme for university courses in AUKUS disciplines. While the government has announced various initiatives pertaining to some AUKUS capabilities, particularly artificial intelligence, it has thus far been application- or programme-agnostic.¹⁰⁹ A new suite of pathways focused on AUKUS would undoubtedly be made more attractive through exchange opportunities in the two partner nations, and would help to enhance the prestige of innovation and careers in defence more generally among younger generations. These investments would transform the pact from a limited procurement exercise to a national mission, which would both generate and preserve unique sovereign expertise and talent density, while identifying the means by which British talent can contribute to the development of collective allied outcomes through defence innovation.¹¹⁰

It is also essential that the UK government fosters the development of a more cohesive small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) ecosystem in the defence sector, in which more tailored support is assigned to provide vital functions such as legal services, personnel mobility and visas, advice on navigating export control systems, fundraising assistance, and performance due diligence across supply chains. Large defence companies have had the resources to undertake these exercises in-house and reorganise their businesses to meet the structural requirements and opportunities of trilateral collaboration. These must be extended to enable greater participation from aspirational younger firms with both the intention to remain British and the motivation to participate in a trilateral defence economy. Britain possesses an outstanding start-up culture, but continues to see globally competitive innovation acquired by

108 UK Government, *Security and Prosperity: Building UK Defence Innovation* (British Progress, 2025), <https://britishprogress.org/api/media/file/Security%20and%20Prosperity%20-%20Building%20UK%20Defence%20Innovation.pdf>.

109 Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, *Top Talent Backed with Masters Funding as Britain's Tech Experts called into Government* (GOV.UK, 2025), <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/top-talent-backed-with-masters-funding-as-britains-tech-experts-called-into-government>.

110 Joe Courtney, *ICYMI: Australian AUKUS Will Help Build Up the U.S. Submarine Industrial Base and Create Hundreds of U.S. Jobs* (Office of Congressman Joe Courtney, 2024), <https://courtney.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/icymi-australian-aukus-will-help-build-us-submarine-industrial-base>.

international partners as businesses seek to scale.¹¹¹ Rather than losing these firms to American acquisition, they should be incentivised to remain in Britain and support the nation's direct contribution towards initiatives like AUKUS, which can facilitate sovereign collaboration rather than competition.

The third strand that requires focused government efforts is in supporting dual-use commercialisation, by enabling greater flexibility in capability transfer application from commercial start-ups to the defence sphere. Many Pillar II priority technologies, including robotics, artificial intelligence and quantum computing, have civilian applications or spillovers. The British government should frame AUKUS as a platform for dual-use industrial policy, better connecting the strategic missions of the Ministry of Defence, the Department of Science, Information and Technology, and the UK's leading research funding bodies, alongside export strategy, and planning for data centres and other foundational infrastructure. This must include a more radical approach to overcoming Britain's implausibly high energy costs,¹¹² balancing the desire for a longer-term transition to carbon neutrality with the urgent needs of sectors experiencing rapid growth, and which can deliver crucial contributions towards national defence. A first step could be to map the commercial opportunities relevant to Pillar II capabilities, and the financing and production value chains that support their development.

Ultimately, AUKUS should be redefined within the UK government as a national advanced capability ecosystem, which brings together deterrence, resilience and prosperity agendas. In practical terms, that means an AUKUS delivery architecture which reaches well beyond the submarine enterprise into the full extension of the UK's research and development and innovation ecosystem. If Britain fails to achieve this, we will constrain AUKUS inside a narrow, nuclear-industrial enclave, and squander its considerable potential to act as a wider engine for British technological advantage and economic growth.

Modern, Pan-Regional Alliances

The significance of AUKUS has at times been diminished by those that favour alternative alliance priorities for the UK. However, AUKUS is a dynamic expression of a modern pan-regional alliance model, which, if it can deliver on its objectives, will become a prototype for new forms of cooperation beyond the Five Eyes partnership. It was prescient in its intention for its members to coalesce around a shared strategic outlook, and to pool expertise, resources and funding to accelerate outcomes towards collective security. The pact is also unique in its emphasis on streamlining the bureaucratic and regulatory inhibitors to industrial cooperation and technology-sharing, driving efficiencies of scale and productive collaboration which also strengthens, rather than depletes, sovereign power. The scrutiny of its nature as an Anglospheric pact, which some elites regard as obsolete or geographically illiterate, obscured the merits of its novel

111 Angus Hanton, "How America Plunders Britain's Tech Economy," *The Spectator*, April 28, 2024, <https://spectator.com/article/how-america-plunders-britains-tech-economy/>; Hannah Boland and Natasha Bernal, "Britain's Start-Up Problem: Why the UK's Most Promising Companies Are Leaving," *The Telegraph*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2018/10/23/britains-start-up-problem-uks-promising-companies-leaving/>.

112 "The Impact of Higher Energy Costs on UK Businesses: 2021 to 2024," *Office for National Statistics*, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/economicoutputandproductivity/output/articles/theimpactofhigherenergycostsonukbusinesses/2021to2024>.

characteristics, which are only possible to achieve in this first instance due to the high levels of cultural contiguity between the partners, but which are likely to become more commonplace elements of alliance cooperation, as liberal nations confront a deteriorating security environment.

AUKUS is also a bridging project between the two theatres most vital to Britain's economic future, and with the strongest deterrence requirements. This bridging function should be central to the pact's strategic narratives as one of the few defensive instruments currently spanning both arenas, because the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific are not separate spheres of interest but a single, interconnected strategic system. Developments in one region now have direct and profound implications for security, prosperity and the preservation of international order in the other. A coherent British foreign policy must therefore recognise and respond to the deepening links between them – not least in terms of the pervasive influence of China, which facilitates and enables rogue states such as Russia and Iran in their efforts to menace, terrorise and weaken Europe.¹¹³ China's expanding economic influence, technological ambition and military capabilities are a global concern. Its intentions to reshape the international order – and the dominant role it has secured in supply chains, infrastructure investment and emerging technologies – are the defining, systemic challenge this century for the future of Western democracies and the architecture which has served their interests.¹¹⁴ It will not be feasible to meaningfully contest China's formidable power and its expressions of coercion and control without a purview across both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific, and the coordination of allies between the theatres.

Despite mounting pressures arising from evolving security responsibilities in Europe and ongoing instability in the Middle East, AUKUS retains its deep relevance for Britain as an alliance mechanism. Indeed, the partnership addresses several of the structural weaknesses that recent conflicts have made increasingly visible, particularly the difficulty that even Britain's most powerful allies face in maintaining sufficient industrial capacity during periods of prolonged geopolitical tension.¹¹⁵ Policymakers have also become more conscious that adversaries may interpret distraction or fragmentation across regions as strategic opportunity, and therefore maintaining visible and credible alliance cohesion across multiple theatres itself becomes a form of deterrence. Most urgently, AUKUS facilitates the scaling up and integration of its partners' technological industrial bases to ensure the West remains competitive in the most vital capabilities, an objective which will remain critical beyond emerging crises in Europe or the Middle East, because technological competition is inherently global and continual. AUKUS therefore endures not simply as an Indo-Pacific initiative, drawing resources away from short-term hotspots, but as part of a wider multi-theatre effort to preserve allied technological, industrial and military capability, in an era of intensifying geopolitical competition and security risks.

113 Evelyn Yeh, "Funding War, Courting Crisis: Why China's Support for Russia Requires a European Response," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, March 9, 2026, <https://ecfr.eu/article/funding-war-courting-crisis-why-chinas-support-for-russia-requires-a-european-response/>.

114 R. Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

115 "Drained by War with Iran, America is Stalling Deliveries of Arms to Europe," *The Economist*, May 21, 2026, <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2026/05/21/drained-by-war-with-iran-america-is-stalling-deliveries-of-arms-to-europe>.

Recommendations

In order to harness AUKUS as an instrument of national advancement and sovereign capability, and to ensure its resilience as an allied endeavour, the UK government should position AUKUS as a strategic integrating force, supported by the following actions:

1. Reframe AUKUS as a Euro-Atlantic security instrument, not merely an Indo-Pacific initiative.

The UK government should formally position AUKUS as central to Britain's maritime deterrence posture in the Arctic, North Atlantic and High North, emphasising its role in defending the UK homeland, protecting seabed infrastructure and securing NATO reinforcement routes.

2. Embed AUKUS at the core of NATO and Northern European defence planning.

AUKUS should be more coherently integrated into NATO and JEF regional planning, operations and exercises, ensuring it becomes a foundational element of the UK's Northern deterrence architecture rather than a parallel defence programme.

3. Develop a unified cross-government AUKUS strategy and delivery architecture.

The government should scale up its centralised AUKUS coordination mechanism in the Cabinet Office, linking the Ministry of Defence, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Treasury, and other relevant departments and agencies, to eliminate institutional fragmentation and align strategic, industrial and technological objectives.

4. Present AUKUS as a national economic and innovation strategy.

The government should redefine AUKUS publicly as a driver of Britain's knowledge economy, highlighting its capacity to stimulate advanced manufacturing, AI, cyber and quantum technologies, and autonomous systems and long-term high-skill employment across the UK.

5. Create a comprehensive national AUKUS workforce and talent pipeline.

Britain should launch a dedicated AUKUS skills strategy, incorporating apprenticeships, doctoral programmes, nuclear engineering pathways, software and AI training, scholarships, and trilateral exchange opportunities with Australia and the United States.

6. Build a stronger defence SME and start-up ecosystem around AUKUS.

The government should provide targeted legal, financial, export-control and scaling support for British SMEs and defence-tech start-ups seeking to participate in AUKUS supply chains, helping prevent strategic technologies and firms from being lost through foreign acquisition.

7. Accelerate dual-use technology integration between civilian and defence sectors.

The UK should establish mechanisms to fast-track the transfer of commercially developed technologies, particularly in AI, robotics, cyber, sensing and quantum computing, into defence applications under Pillar II. The government should encourage young British citizens to pursue careers in technology with defence applications as a civic mission.

8. Align energy and infrastructure policy with AUKUS industrial requirements.

The government should address high industrial energy costs and invest in enabling infrastructure, including data centres, advanced manufacturing capacity and resilient energy supply, to support the expansion of Britain's defence and advanced technology sectors.

9. Use AUKUS as a prototype for modern, pan-regional alliance-building.

The UK should promote AUKUS internationally as a model for future alliance cooperation based on industrial integration, advanced technology sharing, regulatory streamlining, and collective capability development across multiple strategic theatres. It should explore other opportunities with capable and motivated partners in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific.

10. Strengthen the strategic communications narrative around AUKUS.

The government should move beyond presenting AUKUS as a submarine procurement project and instead communicate it as a long-term national mission, connecting deterrence, technological sovereignty, economic resilience, alliance cohesion, and Britain's role in defending the international order across both the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres.

Conclusion

Five years on from the announcement of AUKUS, the Trump administration has concluded its extended review into the pact, following similar studies conducted in Britain and Australia, and the first public announcements have been made regarding the initial signature projects to substantiate Pillar II. There is now an opportunity to renew AUKUS with a corrective approach, which emphasises doctrinal and narrative integration in a manner that will support the pact's resilience in a rapidly evolving geopolitical climate. There were many original sins, however well-meaning, in the choices made at the inception of AUKUS, which have threatened to squander the inimical opportunities of a truly historic partnership, and which have constantly plagued the pact with existential risk. Most of these obstacles pertain to strategic caution, competing incentives and sceptical institutional cultures, which, alongside the continuation of programmatic funding, have resulted in an unusual phenomenon of fragile endurance, which must come to an end.

The project risks between the partners differ. While Australia must grapple with sluggish delivery and persistent communications failures, the UK's performance will be shaped by its willingness to confront the obstacles presented by its dislocated institutional architecture, and the lack of driving ambition for AUKUS in its political culture. It is self-evident that many of the most acute risks to AUKUS reside in Washington, and while the UK has a compelling story to share with the US about how AUKUS aligns with the Trump administration's priorities, it must first ensure that the pact becomes embedded as an indispensable enabling instrument within its own institutions. This requires a reframing of its deep relevance to several of our most urgent national missions in the Euro-Atlantic and High North and the geostrategic battleground of technological advancement. Achieving this will ensure that this vital allied endeavour, which has captured the attention of our partners and adversaries alike, is no longer confined to a discrete set of teams and budget lines, nor reduced to anything more than a capability delivery project.

AUKUS is an instrument through which we do more ourselves: enhancing our contributions to maritime power and deterrence, expanding our industrial capacity, driving innovation in advanced technology, and assuming greater regional burden-sharing in concert with two of our closest global partners. As an allied initiative, AUKUS is a model for disciplined, capability-focused coalitions that connect the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres, without creating new bureaucracies or asking the US to absorb responsibility for areas beyond its strategic remit. Most of all, AUKUS is a mechanism through which we tip the balance in favour of the West to achieve meaningful deterrence towards our adversaries through power projection, and maintain technological superiority in the capabilities most vital to our prosperity and security. Any effort to reset AUKUS now for an era of raw power and escalating threats must include a reframing of its mission, its story and its narrative.



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