

# AUSTRALIA'S SECURITY STRATEGY IN RESPONDING TO CHINA'S THREAT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION THROUGH THE 2021-2024 AUKUS

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## ABSTRACT

This research analyzes Australia's security strategy in responding to China's threat in the Indo-Pacific Region through the AUKUS alliance from 2021 to 2024. Amid rising geopolitical tensions and China's assertive actions, Australia faces strategic pressure that compels it to strengthen its national defense. Using qualitative methods and secondary data analysis, this study applies Alliance Theory and Bandwagoning to examine Australia's choice to align with the United States and the United Kingdom. The findings reveal that AUKUS is a deterrence strategy embedded within Australia's defense policies: Defense Strategic Update 2020, Defense Strategic Review 2023, and National Defense Strategy 2024. These policies reflect a shift from diplomatic multilateralism to military-based alliances, highlighting Australia's increasing dependency on great powers for strategic security. Through AUKUS, Australia is strengthening its defense posture, especially about nuclear-powered submarines and emerging technologies, to uphold regional stability and sovereignty. This study examines how middle powers navigate great competition through strategic security alliances.

## INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific represents a region of significant relevance within the international geopolitical order. This area includes crucial maritime corridors for global trade and is rich in natural assets, especially petroleum and natural gas. Due to its critical sea routes linking Asia, Africa, and the Americas, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a pivotal hub of the global economy. The sustainability and stability of this region are vital to ensuring continued global economic progress. Furthermore, its geostrategic importance has made it a competitive arena for powerful nations aiming to expand their influence across the Indo-Pacific. Ongoing geopolitical friction among leading global powers, most notably China and the United States is reshaping the regional order and introducing new security complexities for middle-tier states such as Australia. Beijing's efforts to advance its military capabilities, territorial assertiveness in the South China Sea, and pressure-



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based diplomacy targeting neighboring states have triggered major concerns in Canberra. Australia must adopt proactive strategic measures to safeguard its interests amid shifting regional dynamics directly impacting its national defense posture and economic resilience.

On September 15, 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States officially launched their trilateral security alliance, AUKUS. The alliance aims to promote stability across the Indo-Pacific region through coordinated strategic efforts. This partnership prioritizes defense capability enhancement alongside technological innovation, including hypersonic weaponry, quantum computing, artificial intelligence (AI), and undersea systems—most notably through developing a nuclear-powered submarine fleet. Establishing AUKUS signifies a military partnership and a calculated initiative by dominant global actors to uphold their influence in the international system. The agreement was designed as a strategic reaction to the evolving geopolitical conditions of China's growing regional influence (Farhan, 2024).

From the perspective of international relations, one can analyze Australia's decision to join AUKUS through two main theoretical frameworks, namely alliance theory. According to Joseph Nye, states form formal or informal alliances to ensure mutual security. These alliances can be motivated by military concerns: two medium-sized countries may decide that they will be safer from threats from a larger country by allying (Joseph Nye, 2007). In the Australian context, AUKUS is a strategic alliance that strengthens national defense capacity against China's military expansion. Second is the concept of bandwagoning. According to Stephen Walt, Bandwagoning is a strategy in which small or medium-sized countries tend to side with large countries or powers to gain protection or economic benefits. This concept is often contrasted with balancing, which is an effort to balance power by forming alliances to counterbalance more dominant countries (Mohamad Rosyidin, 2020).

Bandwagoning understands how Australia, as a middle-sized country, chose to align with the US and the UK. Through the AUKUS in response to geopolitical pressure from China. Instead of balancing China's power directly, Australia aligned with the United States as a force to gain protection, military technology, and a more secure strategic position. The tradition of being a dependent ally is evident in Australia's decision to become part of AUKUS. This move further deepened its strategic reliance on the United States and the United Kingdom, particularly regarding providing nuclear-propelled submarines (Taylor, 2025). This situation exemplifies the phenomenon of bandwagoning, wherein nations align with more powerful entities when confronted with formidable dangers that they cannot surmount alone.

Australia's strategic steps through AUKUS cannot be separated from the direction of national security policy formulated in three important documents: *Defense Strategic Update 2020*, *Defence Strategic Review 2023*, and *National Defense Strategy 2024*. Defence Strategic Update 2020 develops Australia's defense strategy Shape, namely shaping the security environment through diplomatic and regional cooperation; Deter, namely preventing aggression through credible military power; and Respond, namely readiness to respond to threats directly when needed (Government Australia, 2020). Furthermore, the Defence Strategic Review 2023 introduced a new National Defence paradigm that engages all instruments of national power to meet increasingly complex security challenges while affirming the central role of AUKUS in the modernization of Australia's defense posture.

This policy is strengthened by the National Defense Strategy 2024, which introduces the principle of proactive engagement in conflict prevention through strategic



partnerships like AUKUS, enabling Australia to defend itself and play an active role in promoting stability throughout the Indo-Pacific region. These three strategic frameworks are essential for interpreting Australia's present-day defense strategy, particularly amid shifting geopolitical dynamics involving major powers such as China. Within this context, AUKUS functions as a key component of the Deter strategy, empowering Australia to develop a defense posture capable of exerting a deterrent effect against potential hostilities, especially from China. However, implementing AUKUS also brings about specific challenges, notably due to strong opposition from China, which interprets the alliance as disrupting regional balance and its core strategic objectives (Imannuridin, Sudiarso, & Sianturi, 2024). Nevertheless, for Australia, involvement in the AUKUS remains a strategic choice that is considered rational in the face of current strategic environmental pressures.

Jerry Kerry Indrawan et al. explains that Australia, as a middle-power country, leverages strategic partnerships like AUKUS and the QUAD to support regional stability. They stress the significance of Australia's geopolitical role in preserving regional power equilibrium amid mounting pressure from dominant actors like China (Indrawan, 2022). In another study, Pradono Budi Saputro et al. assert that the establishment of AUKUS must be understood within the broader context of complex regional security developments. They note that AUKUS originated as a reaction to escalating regional instability driven by China's assertiveness and a swiftly evolving strategic landscape (Saputro, Ulung, & Abdurrohim, 2024). Meanwhile, Nico Daniel Pasaribu et al. assesses AUKUS as a calculated strategy by Australia to enhance its geopolitical standing in the Asia-Pacific. They argue that AUKUS has provided Australia with access to cutting-edge military capabilities, thereby increasing its influence within the region and counterbalancing China's growing power (Pasaribu et al., 2024).

This research seeks to bring novelty based on the findings of previous studies. The three studies have discussed the AUKUS about Australia's strategic position, regional dynamics, and responses to changes in the international system. Unlike that, this research explicitly describes how Australia responds to the Chinese threat through the defense strategy contained in the Defence Strategic Update 2020, Defence Strategic Review 2023, alongside the National Defence Strategy 2024 and how AUKUS serves as a component of Australia's broader deterrence strategy.

This study asserts that it is essential to examine the issue surrounding Australia's involvement in AUKUS because this phenomenon reflects a potentially profound shift in Australia's national security strategy. Historically, Australia has been known to rely on diplomatic approaches and multilateral cooperation to maintain regional stability. However, the emergence of AUKUS suggests that Australia's response to the Chinese threat is shifting to a more military power-based approach and reliance on great powers. This research examines Australia's security policy via AUKUS from 2021 to 2024, concentrating on Australia's response to the Chinese challenge throughout the Indo-Pacific through the AUKUS Alliance. The study seeks to enhance comprehension of the defense policy dynamics of middle powers amid great power rivalry and serve as an academic reference for examining international relations and regional security.

## METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach, analyzing secondary data gathered from various materials, including books, scholarly articles, media statements, official policy documents, and online news platforms. This method of literature-based inquiry allows the authors to compile information drawn from multiple resources, thereby



expanding the analytical range and enriching the assessment of relevant issues (Khoirunnisa, Firdiyatul Nabila, 2024). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) describe qualitative research as a methodological framework that yields descriptive outcomes through textual data and observations of human behavior within specific contexts, examined in a detailed, integrated, and contextualized manner (Dr. Amir Hamzah, 2020).

This research describes Australia's security strategy in responding to Chinese threats in the Indo-Pacific Region through the AUKUS Alliance for 2021–2024. This research employs Alliance Theory and Bandwagoning to analyze Australia's collaboration with its strategic partner nations to preserve the region's security and stability. From this perspective, alliance formation constitutes a fundamental strategy for Australia in addressing the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific area. By collaborating within the framework of AUKUS, nations can attain a common goal of maintaining power equilibrium and addressing the challenges brought about by China's rise.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Dynamics of Australia's Relationship with China

The bilateral ties between Australia and China have significantly changed since the early 21st century. In the early 2000s, China's rapid economic development strengthened its partnership with Australia as a key exporter of iron ore, coal, and liquefied natural gas. Implementing the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA) in 2015 enhanced the relationship by lowering trade tariffs on Australian goods (Timsina & Culas, 2020). China remains Australia's leading trade partner, accounting for approximately 39% of Australian exports to the Chinese market during 2019–2020, totaling \$150.5 billion (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

However, despite the robust economic partnership, political and security ties between the two countries have become increasingly strained. Since 2017, Australia has pursued a foreign policy direction that reinforces its strategic alignment with the United States and allied Western nations, especially in promoting unrestricted maritime navigation through the South China Sea, an area Beijing views as a direct threat to its sovereign claims (Hyun Binn Cho, 2024). Canberra's support for the Indo-Pacific vision of transparency and freedom has widened the diplomatic gap with China, which now interprets Australia's stance as part of a broader Western initiative to limit its regional influence.

The situation escalated in 2020 when then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Foreign Minister Marise Payne called for an independent global investigation into the origins and source of the COVID-19 epidemic (Rezza, n.d.). The suggestion was prompted by concerns over how the Chinese authorities initially handled the emergence of the virus in Wuhan. China perceived Australia's demand as a hostile political maneuver and accused it of acting on behalf of U.S. interests (Fajar Oktavianto, 2023). In response, China retaliated with trade sanctions, such as high tariffs on Australian wine and barley products and unofficial barriers on coal and beef imports (Olga Leonova, 2022). These actions are part of China's coercive diplomatic strategy, which aims to punish countries that oppose its policies (Graeme Dobell, 2021). Australia's dependence on trade with China makes the country highly vulnerable to China's economic policies.

In 2021, diplomatic tensions worsened following the announcement of the AUKUS alliance involving Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, aimed at enhancing Australia's military capacities, most notably by acquiring submarines powered by nuclear propulsion. China perceives this trilateral pact to be a direct challenge to





regional equilibrium. In reaction to the formation of AUKUS, Beijing intensified its military advancement efforts, marked by a 7.1% increase in its defense expenditure in 2022 (Fikri Nur Aini, 2024).

### China as a Threat to Australia

Australia views military developments in maritime areas across the Indo-Pacific region as an important regional security issue. Since 2014, China has constructed various defense-related structures on contested islands, notably within the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos, within the scope of Beijing's broad sovereignty claim defined by the nine-dash line (Sari, 2021). This claim spans the oceanic zone surrounding the South China Sea and overlaps with territorial assertions from nations like Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia (Khoirunnisa Khoirunnisa, 2023). Various military assets that China has deployed include airfields, missile systems, radar facilities, and naval infrastructure (Serena Seyfort, 2021).

These developments have increased regional tensions, particularly given that the South China Sea is an essential maritime corridor supporting Australia's export flows to key Asian economies. Australia's economic well-being relies on uninterrupted maritime transit in this corridor, and Chinese dominance could jeopardize that access (AFP, 2015). In 2020, Australia engaged in collaborative naval exercises with Japan and the United States, deploying five warships and traversing the South China Sea (CNN Indonesia, 2020). These actions highlight Australia's commitment to safeguarding freedom of movement and countering Beijing's growing regional sway.

Beyond the South China Sea, Australia faces strategic complications due to China's expanding defensive posture throughout the South Pacific. Beijing has deepened military ties with countries such as the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, creating the potential for establishing military facilities or a heightened presence in the region (Budi Wibawa, Heatubun, Widnyana, & Mahendra, 2024). The geographic proximity of these countries to Australia exacerbates concerns, as any increase in Chinese military influence in the Region could directly affect Australia's national security. Rapid advances in Chinese military technology further exacerbate Australia's concerns. China has developed long-range missiles capable of reaching up to 15,000km, while the distance between mainland China and Australia is only about 4,000km. Moreover, China intends to establish military bases on the Solomon Islands and in Vanuatu, exacerbating Australia's concerns over China's potential military footprint throughout the South Pacific (Agus Sugiharto, 2024). Despite China's denial of intentions to establish a military facility in Vanuatu, this situation exacerbates Australia's apprehension about potential future hostilities.

Beginning in the early 2000s, China has rapidly upgraded its armed forces, particularly through developments in advanced fields like artificial intelligence, military satellite infrastructure, and unmanned aerial systems. These technological breakthroughs have significantly enhanced China's ability to conduct integrated operations across various domains, including land, sea, air, and cyberspace. A 2023 publication by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) noted that worldwide defense spending reached a record \$2.44 trillion, with China surpassing even the United States (Nan Tian, Diego Lopes Da Silva, 2024). China's efforts to expand its reach beyond its neighboring areas have sparked alarm in Australia. This country depends on a stable Indo-Pacific for its national security and economic prosperity. This continued military growth can destabilize the regional power structure and jeopardize freedom of maritime movement, particularly through the South China Sea, a critical route for Australia's international commerce (Muntasyir, Panji, & Santoso, 2022).



## Australia's Security Policy

Confronted with escalating challenges to maintaining stability across the Indo-Pacific, particularly due to China's growing military power, the Australian government devised a set of strategic frameworks presented in three key documents: the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, 2023 Defence Strategic Review, and 2024 National Defence Strategy. Collectively, these policy papers mark a transition in Australia's defense posture from a traditionally reactive approach to one that is more assertive, integrated, and grounded in alliance-based cooperation, primarily through AUKUS. Together, they illustrate Australia's increasingly strong and proactive reaction to China's coercive behavior and rising military pressure, notably in maritime regions like the South China Sea and nearby waters.

The Defence Strategic Update released in 2020 marked the beginning of Canberra's explicit recognition of shifts in the regional strategic environment. The document argues that the Indo-Pacific has become a prominent zone for strategic rivalry among leading global actors, with the United States and China serving as its principal contenders. One of the key implications of this document is the removal of the old assumption of a ten-year warning period before a potential major conflict. In its place, a new approach known as shape, deter, respond, shaping the strategic order, deterring threats early, and responding militarily when necessary. Although the countries did not formally establish AUKUS then, this policy direction signaled the importance of closer cooperation with allied countries as a foundation for strengthening the national defense posture (Government Australia, 2020).

Subsequently, through the 2023 Defence Strategic Review, the Australian administration introduced an updated strategic framework known as National Defense. This approach expands the defense dimension by involving all instruments of state power, including diplomacy, intelligence, economic tools, and the domestic defense sector, to strengthen national resilience. Australia explicitly incorporated AUKUS within this strategy as an integral element in its military framework. The country committed itself to acquiring submarines powered by nuclear propulsion. It established collaborative ties with the United States and the United Kingdom to develop cutting-edge defense capabilities to enhance Australia's overall military strength (Government, 2023). All these measures aim to ensure Australia has sufficient deterrence against potential military pressure from China.

Meanwhile, the National Defense Strategy 2024 serves as a guide to the concrete implementation of the previous review. In this document, the primary strategy adopted is the Strategy of Denial, which aims to prevent conflict from occurring in the first place, deter any possible adversary from successfully using force as a means of coercion against Australia, and support the creation of regional stability and prosperity. The strategy also aims to maintain a regional strategic balance favorable to Australia's interests (Government & Defence, 2024). This approach focuses on enhancing the Australian Defense Force's (ADF) deterrence capability by integrating forces in five key domains: sea, air, land, space, and cyber.

In addition, Australia is deepening its defense collaborations with partner nations, especially under the AUKUS framework. Within this framework, AUKUS is a defense-oriented pact and an important mechanism for advancing long-term military technology cooperation. The first Pillar of AUKUS focuses on cooperation in procuring nuclear-powered submarines. In contrast, the second Pillar includes collaboration in artificial intelligence, cyber defense, and other advanced military technologies. These initiatives aim to ensure that Australia can effectively and sustainably counter strategic pressures



and threats, particularly those posed by China within the broader Indo-Pacific area (McDougall, 2023).

The documents establish a foundational strategic framework guiding Australia's defense outlook from 2020 to 2024. The transition from a geographically confined defense strategy to one emphasizing collaborative alliances reflects an acknowledgment that regional threats require multilateral responses. Within this framework, AUKUS functions as a defense enhancer and a diplomatic declaration, signaling Australia's alignment with nations dedicated to upholding regional order and adherence to international norms throughout the Indo-Pacific. This approach addresses intensifying geopolitical tensions linked to China and reinforces Australia's position in the region's shifting security architecture.

### **AUKUS as Australia's Security Strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region**

AUKUS represents a trilateral defense and strategic alliance comprising Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. This arrangement was formally introduced in September 2021 and has been organized into two principal components. At its foundation, AUKUS aspires to offset China's expanding influence across Indo-Pacific waters by promoting a secure, open, and stable regional order (Khairisa Ferida, 2023). Over the past few years, Beijing has emerged as a dominant naval force, now possessing the largest submarine fleet globally. Moreover, China continues to allocate substantial resources toward advancing its military modernization programs (Melati Sari, Octonain Djemat, & Oktaviani, 2025). AUKUS reflects the three countries' strategic commitment to share advanced military technologies and build closer military interoperability to strengthen collective defense systems in the Region.

Pillar I of AUKUS focused on assisting Australia with the procurement of a submarine fleet powered by nuclear energy, equipped with conventional weapons, and excluding nuclear warheads. On March 13, 2023, the heads of government from Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, namely Anthony Albanese, Rishi Sunak, and Joe Biden, issued a joint statement during a meeting in San Diego, California. This statement set the direction for implementing Pillar I, which focuses on developing nuclear-powered submarines. The three nations agreed to co-develop SSN-AUKUS, a next-generation submarine based on a UK design that incorporates cutting-edge technologies contributed by all three partners, including the most advanced submarine innovations from the United States, thereby accelerating Australia's progress toward operating nuclear-propelled submarines (Plus, 2026). The three countries established a phased approach as follows.



Table 1. Stages of AUKUS Pillar I Implementation

Phase	Period	Activities
Initial Training and Placement	From 2023-2026	During this phase, Australian defense and non-military staff commenced integration into the naval and undersea warfare divisions of the US and UK. This move aimed to accelerate technical training and operational mastery of submarines. In addition, the United States will increase nuclear-powered submarine visits to ports in Australia starting in 2023, while the United Kingdom will begin similar visits in 2026.
Submarine Rotation and Capability Building	Around 2027	In this Phase, the US and the UK began rotating the periodic presence of SSN submarines in Australia. The aim was to accelerate Australia's national capacity building in terms of human resources, infrastructure readiness, and regulatory systems to support nuclear submarine capabilities independently.
Virginia Class Submarine Acquisition	Early 2030s	This phase is characterized by the planned transfer of three Virginia-class submarines from the United States to Australia, with the potential for up to two more if required. This acquisition process will strengthen Australia's operational capability and independence in managing its nuclear-powered submarine fleet.
Production and Operationalization of SSN-AUKUS	Late 2030s - Early 2040s	In the concluding phase, the UK will provide the inaugural SSN-AUKUS submarine to the Royal Navy. At the same time, Australia will finalize and supply the first domestically constructed SSN-AUKUS submarine to the Royal Australian Navy. This is an important milestone in achieving Australia's self-sufficient sea defense capability.

Source: Extracted from the Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS, 2023.

The table above illustrates Australia's planned efforts to support strengthening infrastructure, technical proficiency, the industrial base, and human resources needed to develop, maintain, operate, and manage its sovereign fleet of submarines powered by nuclear propulsion. The country remains fully committed to ensuring responsible naval nuclear power technology management. Under the AUKUS trilateral cooperation, Australia is projected to have up to 11 nuclear-powered submarines. This plan includes acquiring three American-made Virginia-class submarines, possibly adding two additional units if required. In addition, Australia will build eight new generation SSN-AUKUS submarines in stages in South Australia, with a target of one every three years. To support this development, Australia allocated A\$2 billion, or around Rp20.4 trillion, to strengthen defense infrastructure, including modernizing the naval base in Perth, which will become the operational center for new nuclear submarines (Daniel Ahmad Fajri, 2023).





Table 2. AUKUS Pillar I Structure and Potential Alternatives

Pillar 1 is currently structured	Potential alternatives to the structured division of labor by the US and Australia	
	One Variation	Other Variants
Australia's SSN mission to be undertaken in the 2030s and beyond by...	The Australian Navy's SSNs, initially including Virginia-class vessels acquired from the United States, will be supplemented by the domestically constructed SSN AUKUS.	US Navy SSN until the Australian-made AUKUS SSN replaced it
US and UK submarine rotation to Australia	Yes	Yes
3 to 5 Virginia grade SSNs sold to Australia	Yes	No
AUKUS SSNs built in Australia for use in Australia	Yes	No

Source: U.S. Congressional Research Service, 2024.

The table above illustrates the three main scenarios for sharing responsibilities among Australia and the United States under Pillar 1 of AUKUS. The current structure sees Australia gradually attempting to manage and construct its nuclear-powered submarine fleet. Simultaneously, both the U.S. and the U.K. maintain their support through rotational submarine deployments. However, two alternatives are proposed, the first of which continues to allow Australia to acquire submarine industrial and operational capabilities through gradual technology transfer. In contrast, the second suggests complete dependence on the United States, where we would carry out all submarine missions. Australia would shift its investment in non-submarine military resources such as long-range missiles and drones(O'Rourke Ronald, 2024). This comparison exposes the dynamics of Australia's strategic choice between building long-term defense independence or relying on the strength of alliance partners.

Pillar I of the AUKUS program on nuclear-powered submarines with conventional weapons has made significant progress since the announcement of the Optimal Pathway in March 2023. The Royal Australian Navy (RAN) has collaborated with US and UK institutions during training (Media, 2024). Numerous training programs have occurred, such as those held at the US Submarine School in Groton, the US Nuclear Power School in Charleston, and the UK's facility at HMS Sultan. Six Australian personnel completed their training(U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). Additionally, two officers have completed reactor operator training at HMS Sultan, and two more are scheduled for training. The initial cohort of graduates will serve as the trailblazers in shaping the future capabilities for operating Australia's fleet of nuclear-powered submarines.

During the initial phase of industrial training, Australian industrial workers began engaging in programs with the United States Navy aircraft carrier project at Pearl Harbor



and the shipyard in Barrow-in-Furness, UK, gaining hands-on experience in the assembly and upkeep of nuclear-powered submarines(U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). This expertise will improve the maintenance procedures of nuclear assault submarines (SSNs) in Australia. At HMAS Stirling Sea Base near Perth, Western Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom aim to establish a Submarine Rotational Force-West (SRF-West). Operations are projected to commence as early as 2027. They will rotate up to four Virginia-class submarines from the US and one Astute-class submarine from the UK(Ben Diherty, 2023).

Training of Australian personnel in Guam will begin in early 2024 as Pillar I implementation. The frequency of USUS submarine visits to HMAS Stirling will increase after the arrival of USS North Carolina in August 2023. A forthcoming visit of a US SSN vessel is expected in the first half of 2024, while the initial repair work on a US SSN vessel at HMAS Stirling is anticipated for the latter half of that year(U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). Australia remains fully committed to maintaining rigorous nuclear non-proliferation standards through open and constructive engagements with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The nation has commenced bilateral negotiations with the agency on the provisions outlined in Article 14 of Australia's Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement. In July 2023, Australia enacted the Defence Legislation Amendment (Naval Nuclear Propulsion) Act 2023, establishing an independent regulator for nuclear safety to support effective AUKUS implementation(Vienna, 2023).

Pillar II includes development and collaboration in advanced technologies and modern military capabilities(John Christianson, Sean Monaghan, 2023). To counteract China's technological advancements, the second pillar seeks to strengthen technological leadership among the US, UK, and Australia through the integration of resources into frontier military fields like cyber operations, underwater warfare capabilities, hypersonic and anti-hypersonic systems, electromagnetic warfare, secure information sharing, as well as quantum computing (ASPI, 2023). Pillar II primarily emphasizes six technological domains, while the remaining two pertain to functional issues.



Table 3. AUKUS Pillar II Technology Development Focus

Capability	Explanation
Undersea Capabilities	The AUKUS <i>Undersea Robotics Autonomous Systems</i> (AURAS) initiative involves the three partner countries developing autonomous subsea vehicles, with trials commencing in 2023.
Quantum Technologies	Conducted through the AUKUS <i>Quantum Arrangement (AQuA)</i> , it concentrates on next-generation positioning, navigation and timing technologies over the next three years.
AI and Autonomy	The focus is on strengthening autonomous systems and artificial intelligence in decision-making and resilience in disruptive environments, although there is no specific project name yet.
Advanced Cyber Capabilities	It aims to protect critical communications and operations systems from cyberattacks; no specific project has been mentioned.
Hypersonic and Counter Hypersonic Capabilities	AUKUS partners are accelerating the development of hypersonic technology and anti-hypersonic defense systems, but they have not yet named a formal initiative.
Electronic Warfare	Focus on improving interoperability through a shared understanding of Electronic Warfare technologies and techniques in conflict environments.
Innovation	Promote accelerated defense innovation and commercial technology integration through cross-country collaboration, with no specific projects named.
Information Sharing	Expand and accelerate the exchange of sensitive information to support all cooperation under the AUKUS Second Pillar.

Source: Processed from CSISS Briefs-UKUS Pillar II, 2023.

Through AUKUS, Australia is not only strengthening its military capabilities independently but also positioning itself within a collective defense system capable of dealing with regional strategic pressures, including from China. AUKUS reflects the determination shared by Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom to intensify their involvement within the Indo-Pacific region, particularly regarding defense and strategic affairs. Its principal objective is to curb China's growing regional presence. AUKUS has a holistic approach, emphasizing enhancing Australia's military power by transferring advanced technology.

UKUS enhances Australia's status as a central maritime defense actor within the Indo-Pacific region through advanced technological collaboration, intensive training, and improved regional interoperability. The project may also position Australia as the region's next significant military presence (Hariyadin, 2024). Given China's expanding defense posture in and beyond the South China Sea, the AUKUS alliance grants Australia access to critical technological and strategic capabilities needed to defend national sovereignty, sustain a balance of power, and reinforce regional stability. In his speech, Prime Minister of Australia, Anthony Albanese, stated that:



"The AUKUS agreement affirmed today in San Diego constitutes the most substantial unprecedented investment in Australia's defense capabilities. It will augment Australia's national security and regional stability while fostering a future characterized by domestic production through unprecedented investments in skills, employment, and infrastructure, alongside providing an advanced defense capacity. My government is resolute in its commitment to enhance our defense capabilities. We are resolutely committed to enhancing security through investments in our regional partnerships"(Albanese, n.d.).

This statement confirms that AUKUS represents Australia's most consequential defense investment to enhance its national defense capabilities. This investment bolsters regional security and stability while fostering domestic capacity through workforce upskilling, employment generation, and infrastructure expansion. In addition, Canberra has demonstrated a strong commitment to enhancing regional security by cultivating close, enduring ties with neighboring states to help preserve stability throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

Australia's strategic orientation, as outlined in the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, 2023 Defence Strategic Review, and 2024 National Defence Strategy, asserts that the nation's security depends on collaboration with regional partners and a defense-oriented alliance with the United States. Australia aims to strengthen its long-range offensive capabilities through the AUKUS trilateral defense framework to deter and reduce emerging security risks. These efforts include acquiring Tomahawk cruise missiles, Long-Range Anti-Ship Missiles, and long-range munitions compatible with the F/A-18 and F-35A, as well as progressing in the development of hypersonic weapons and autonomous undersea systems(RNS, 2023).

The AUKUS partnership is integral to the national strategy of strengthening military capability. In support of this, Australia's defense budget for Fiscal Years 2024-2025 is estimated at USD 35.5 billion (AUD 55.7 billion), or 2.0% of GDP. The government plans to increase the budget to USD 64 billion (AUD 100 billion) in Fiscal Years 2033-2034, or approximately 2.4% of GDP. This fiscal commitment reflects Australia's strategic intent to maintain regional stability and sustain its military interoperability in the Indo-Pacific Region(Yusril Ihza Mahendra, Ruli Inayah Ramadhoan, 2024).

Australia's national security strategy generally aligns with the policy directions in the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, the 2023 Defence Strategic Review, and the 2024 National Defence Strategy. These three documents form the framework of Australia's defense strategy: shape, deter, and respond. In this context, AUKUS plays a direct role as part of the Deter Pillar, which is an effort to prevent potential threats through increasing military strength and long-range offensive capabilities (Khoirunnisa, Sos, & Si, 2023). Australia seeks to create a credible deterrence effect against challenges throughout the Indo-Pacific region by enhancing its defense posture and strategic cooperation in alliances.

One tangible form of this effort is seen in the AUKUS alliance, which openly shows China's intention to contain its military influence(Li, 2022). This approach reflects the application of alliance theory, where countries form defense cooperation to face common threats and strengthen their regional strategic position. Australia's involvement in AUKUS not only demonstrates a collective strategy in dealing with external challenges but also shows a pattern of bandwagoning, where a country chooses to align with the dominant powers, namely the US and the UK, in order to gain protection and improve its security capabilities amidst China's rising military threat.



China's growing military presence has raised significant concerns across the region, particularly within Australia. As a regional middle power in the Indo-Pacific, Australia acknowledges that China's expanding long-range strike capabilities may threaten its sovereignty. In response, Australia needs to recalibrate its defense posture by enhancing military capabilities through collaborative security alliances to reduce its capability gap with Beijing (Eka Tantri Purnamasari, 2023). In this regard, the AUKUS partnership is a crucial mechanism to advance regional stability in alignment with Australia's broader strategic goals. Australia's engagement in the pact also reflects its aspiration to contribute to the Indo-Pacific vision in cooperation with key partners, the United States and the United Kingdom, while reinforcing its strategic influence amid intensifying global power competition.

## CONCLUSION

This study finds that AUKUS is a foundational element of Australia's modern defense policy in confronting the shifting security dynamics across the Indo-Pacific, especially in light of China's growing strategic influence. The transformation in Australia-China relations from economic collaboration to geopolitical rivalry has driven Australia to reinforce its defense strategy via alliance-centered mechanisms. Supported by both the United States and the United Kingdom, the AUKUS structure offers Australia the opportunity to acquire advanced military technologies, including nuclear-powered submarines and extended-range strike capabilities. Through strategic direction provided by three principal policy frameworks, the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, 2023 Defence Strategic Review, and 2024 National Defence Strategy, Australia is transitioning from a reactive security model toward a more assertive, forward-leaning deterrent strategy. Integrating AUKUS into Australia's defense planning elevates its military potential and illustrates an alignment strategy, reflecting how middle powers adapt to shifting geopolitical dynamics and the assertiveness of great powers. In this light, AUKUS is a tangible component of Australia's deterrence strategy aimed at safeguarding sovereignty and promoting equilibrium in an increasingly volatile regional order. AUKUS is a concrete manifestation of Australia's deter strategy to maintain stability and sovereignty in an increasingly complex region.

Future research is recommended to evaluate the long-term implications of military alliances such as AUKUS on regional stability and broader multilateral relations and assess the extent to which this deterrent strategy is effective in de-escalating conflicts without triggering a new arms race.

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