The AUKUS Submarine Roadmap
A Bridge Too Far?

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The year 2025 has proven to be a particularly challenging period for the AUKUS trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US). The developments and discourses since the beginning of the year indicate the onset of a more difficult phase for the AUKUS, marked by heightened political uncertainty and growing geopolitical complexity. Following three years of study and tangible progress made under the agreement, the re-election of Donald Trump to the White House for a second term has raised doubts among the observers regarding the US' continued commitment to the AUKUS.

On 8 February 2025, the newly appointed US Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, stated that President Trump was very aware of the AUKUS and supportive of the US' continued commitment to the agreement.[1] Ironically, later in the month during a press conference held in the Oval Office alongside Prime Minister Kier Starmer, when President Trump was questioned by a journalist regarding his stance on the AUKUS defence agreement, he responded by asking, "What does that mean?".[2] When the journalist elaborated, Trump stated that the agreement would be discussed with his British counterpart. He also highlighted that the US has a strong bilateral relationship with Australia. Given that the AUKUS has been at the centre of

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strategic relations between the US, the UK and Australia since its inception in September 2021, Trump's apparent unfamiliarity of this multi-billion dollar defence deal quickly drew the attention of global observers. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese swiftly downplayed the incident, describing it as simply a momentary lapse in recognising the acronym.

Subsequent developments, however, have raised more serious concerns about the future of the AUKUS. Most notable among these developments was the decision by the Trump administration, in June 2025, to launch a formal review of the AUKUS to determine whether the pact aligns with its 'America First' agenda.[3] The review was headed by the US Undersecretary of Defense, Elbridge Andre Colby, known for his critical views on the AUKUS. Another issue that raised concerns was the testimony of the incoming US Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral Daryl Caudle, before the Committee on Armed Services on 24 July 2025. In this testimony, Admiral Caudle had categorically warned about the imminent difficulties in transferring three of the US Navy's Virginia-class nuclear attack submarines (SSNs) to Australia as part of the AUKUS agreement. He attributed this to the US Navy's shrinking submarine fleet and persisting challenges facing American shipbuilding industries in constructing and delivering new submarines.[4]

Both these developments have sparked intense political debate in Australia involving former prime ministers and lawmakers, who have raised concerns regarding the US' ability to deliver the critically needed Virginia-class SSNs to the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) by the early 2030s. Additionally, there is growing public discourse in Australia questioning whether the AUKUS agreement aligns with their country's strategic priorities, or if it potentially undermines Australia's strategic autonomy. To determine whether these developments indeed signal a challenging phase ahead for the AUKUS, it is essential to, first, examine why the acquisition of three Virginia-class SSNs is critical to Australia and what obstacles is the US facing in delivering them? Second, it is important to assess the extent to which these issues are shaping Australian public perception of the AUKUS agreement. Finally, it is necessary to examine the critical role the UK is playing in sustaining and advancing this trilateral security partnership.

AUKUS Submarine Roadmap and the Virginia-Class SSNs

On 14 March 2023, former US President Joe Biden, along with his British and Australian counterparts, unveiled a multi-phased roadmap in San Diego for delivering SSNs to Australia under the AUKUS agreement. The broad

objective of this roadmap is to provide the requisite support for Australia to construct, maintain and operate a fleet of SSNs by developing its industrial infrastructure, technological capabilities and manpower.[5] As per the first phase of this roadmap, by 2027, the US Navy and Royal Navy will begin the forward deployment of their SSNs to Australia under the Submarine Rotational Force–West (SRF-West) initiative. The basing of these American and British SSNs in Australia will enable the RAN personnel and technicians to build operational capabilities and skills for independently maintaining their own SSNs acquired through the AUKUS.[6]

In the second phase of this roadmap, the US intends to sell at least three of its Virginia-class SSNs to Australia by the early 2030s, pending the approval of the US Congress. Additionally, this phase includes the option to provide Australia with up to two more Virginia-class SSNs if needed. In the third and final phase of the roadmap, Australia will begin receiving the first of the SSNs designed and constructed under the AUKUS agreement. This new class of submarines, called SSN-AUKUS, is expected to be based on a next-generation hull design and equipped with state-of-the-art technology. The first of these SSNs will be constructed in the UK and delivered to Australia by the late 2030s. Subsequent SSNs in this class are planned to be domestically constructed in Australia, with deliveries to the RAN scheduled to begin in the early 2040s.

The acquisition of three Virginia-class SSNs by Australia plays a very vital role in addressing a critical capability gap expected to emerge in the RAN as a result of the AUKUS agreement. As early as 2009, Australia, through a Defence White Paper, had acknowledged its depleting undersea capability in the face of China's growing strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific region.[7] The White Paper emphasised the need for Australia to replace its ageing fleet of conventional diesel-electric submarines (SSKs), consisting of six ageing Collin-class vessels. It further highlighted the need for acquiring at least 12 advanced SSKs by 2030 to meet Australia's long-term maritime security requirement.[8] This eventually paved the way for a multi-billion dollar defence agreement between Australia and France, in 2016, for the construction of 12 SSKs. These SSKs were to be based on French 'Shortfin Barracuda' design and built domestically in Australian shipyards. However, the announcement of the AUKUS in September 2021 led to the abrupt scrapping of the deal between Australia and France, creating a diplomatic rift from which both nations have yet to fully recover.

Australia's scuttling of its submarine acquisition deal with France has created a deep conundrum for the RAN. The first SSNs under the AUKUS

agreement are not expected to be delivered until the late 2030s, while the RAN's ageing Collin-class submarines are bound to reach the end of their service life by the early 2030s. As a result, the RAN expects to be confronted by a critical capability gap due to lack of operational submarine assets for a substantial period of time. In order to bridge this critical capability gap, the US has agreed to sell three of its Virginia-class SSNs to Australia, by the early 2030s, under the AUKUS submarine roadmap. However, if the US is unable to fulfil this commitment due to some constraints, then the RAN's ability to independently meet Australia's maritime security requirement will be severely degraded.

The US Constraints

As early as March 2023, when the AUKUS's submarine roadmap was first unveiled, many observers in the US, including Elbridge Colby, expressed concerns regarding its implementation.[9] They opined that the US commitments under the AUKUS's submarine roadmap might be overly ambitious, given the significant challenges the American submarine industrial base was facing in meeting existing domestic demands. In June 2023, just three months after the AUKUS roadmap was unveiled, the US Navy submitted its new force-level goals to congressional defence committees in a 'Battle Force Ship Assessment and Requirement' (BFSAR) report.[10] According to this report, the US Navy aims to achieve a force level of 381 ships over the next three decades. This projected force level includes a total of 78 nuclear submarines, comprising 12 ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) and 66 SSNs. The US Navy's current SSBN fleet consists entirely of the Cold War-era Ohio-class submarines, which are slated to reach the end of their service life by the early 2030s. They are scheduled to be replaced by advanced Colombia-class SSBNs from 2031 onwards. The US Navy currently operates a total of 49 SSNs, comprising 23 Los Angeles-class, three Seawolf-class and 23 Virginia-class submarines.[11] Both Los Angeles and Seawolf classes are Cold War-era submarines which are expected to be phased out by the early 2030s. Subsequently, Virginia-class submarines are set to become the backbone of the US Navy's SSN fleet through the 2050s.

Of the 66 Virginia-class SSNs planned, only 23 are currently in service, with the remainder being constructed at two shipyards: General Dynamics Electric Boat (GDEB) and Huntington Ingalls–Newport News Shipbuilding (HII-NNS). These shipyards are the only facilities in the US capable of constructing nuclear-powered submarines. Consequently, in addition to

the Virginia class, the Colombia-class SSBNs are also being built in these shipyards. Like the rest of the American shipbuilding industry, these two shipyards are struggling to meet the US Navy's demand due to various challenges. According to the US Government Accountability Office, most shipyards are plagued by inadequate space, ageing infrastructure and a shortage of workforce possessing the necessary skill-sets.[12] Due to these challenges, the American shipbuilding industry's current production rate of 1.3 submarines per year falls significantly short of the target rate of 2.2–2.3 submarines per year, which is necessary to meet both the US' own maritime force-level goals and fulfil its commitment to Australia to deliver three submarines under the AUKUS.[13] As Admiral Caudle acknowledged before the US Senate Committee on Armed Services, achieving this goal is a tall order for the American submarine industrial base.[14]

Furthermore, even if President Trump or his successor decides to proceed with the transfer of three submarines to Australia, the US government would require the approval of Congress. In such a scenario, the president would need to assure Congress that the transfer does not compromise or diminish the US' own national security requirements. Given the US Navy's shrinking SSN fleet and existing production shortfall, securing congressional approval for the transfer could prove highly challenging. Moreover, within Congress, there has been sustained opposition to the transfer of critical military technologies, like nuclear propulsion, even to the US' closest allies. This became evident in January 2023, when senior Democrat and Republican senators urged the Biden administration to not sell nuclear submarines to Australia as such a transfer would degrade the country's own military capabilities and undermine its strategic supremacy.[15] All these challenges would certainly have influenced Washington's review of the AUKUS, the findings of which may not be fully disclosed to the public but will undoubtedly have a significant impact on the US' decision to provide Australia with its Virginia-class SSNs.

Australia's Growing Dilemma

Since its inception, the AUKUS has enjoyed consistent bipartisan support from Australia's two major political parties. However, it has also faced strong opposition from certain sections of Canberra's policymaking community, most notably from the Australian Greens (AG), which is the third-largest political party in Australia. Other prominent critics of the pact include Australia's former prime ministers, Paul Keating and Malcom Turnbull. While these critical views have largely remained on the sidelines until now,

they have gained increasing prominence in the light of recent developments. These critics have strongly opposed Australia's accession to the AUKUS on the basis of three broad arguments.

Compromising Australia's National Security Priorities and Strategic Autonomy

Critics have consistently argued that the AUKUS seriously compromises both Australia's immediate national security priorities as well as its long-term strategic interests. They have pointed out that the cancellation of Australia's submarine deal with France, coupled with growing uncertainties over America's ability to deliver its nuclear submarines as a viable alternative, has created a significant impediment to the RAN's undersea capabilities in the near future. Furthermore, critics have warned that the AUKUS will inevitably lead to Australia's increasing dependence on the US for its national security, at the cost of its own strategic autonomy, in the long run.

Thrusting Australia into Sino-US Strategic Competition in the Indo-Pacific

Several critics, including Paul Keating, have argued that the AUKUS is bound to needlessly entrench Australia in the emerging strategic competition between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific. They have opined that by joining the AUKUS, Australia has inadvertently become part of a broader US-led strategy in the Indo-Pacific to contain China. They have also suggested that the basing of US submarines and other military assets in Australian territory would open up possibilities of Australia coming under attack in the event of a future conflict, especially over Taiwan.[16] These concerns are based on an assumption prevailing among certain sections of Australia's strategic community that China does not present any direct military threat to their sovereignty. Such critics believe that through the AUKUS, Australia is unnecessarily antagonising its bilateral relationship with China.

Entrapment of Australia's Investments without Guarantees

In August 2024, the three AUKUS nations signed an agreement titled 'Cooperation Related to Naval Nuclear Propulsion (NNP)'. This agreement serves as the legal framework under which the US and the UK will transfer highly confidential NNP technology to Australia. Article 13 of this agreement serves as an exit clause, permitting any party to unilaterally terminate this arrangement with just one year's notice.[17] This provision, thus, allows the US or the UK to withdraw without any obligation to provide compensation

to Australia. Conversely, the indemnity clauses in this agreement obligate Australia to pay compensation to the US or the UK in case of any accidents that may occur during the construction and maintenance of the nuclear submarines.[18] Furthermore, Australia has pledged over US$ 3 billion to support the American submarine industrial base, with US$ 1.6 billion already disbursed.[19] According to the AUKUS critics, this agreement imposes unfair monetary obligations on Australia with no guarantees. At the same time, it provides complete leeway to both the US and the UK if they choose to exit the pact at any given time without any requirement to compensate Australia. Hence, critics warn that Australia risks entrapment of its investments in the AUKUS, without any tangible guarantees or viable alternative solutions to address its maritime security requirements.

Successive Australian governments have consistently downplayed or dismissed the aforementioned criticisms, often describing them as farfetched or alarmist. Recently, the Australian Defence Minister, Richard Marles, downplayed the US review of the AUKUS by describing it as routine assessment undertaken by new administrations of agreements signed by their predecessors.[20] However, dramatic reversals of US foreign policies under the Trump administration and its high-handed approach to bilateral relationship even with its closest allies have influenced Australian perceptions. A recent poll conducted by the Australia Institute reveals that nearly 66 per cent of Australians support a parliamentary inquiry into the AUKUS; this represents a 10 per cent increase from the previous year's poll on the same issue. Also, only 49 per cent of respondents believe that the AUKUS will be beneficial for Australia's national security.[21] The Director of the American Institute, Emma Shortis, opines that it is ironic that Australia, which bears the brunt of both the cost and the risk associated with the AUKUS, is yet to initiate a review of the deal.[22] These trends clearly indicate that recent developments are influencing Australian public opinion, with growing support for greater scrutiny of the AUKUS agreement.

The UK's Enduring Support

In April 2025, the UK initiated a parliamentary inquiry to review the AUKUS partnership. The review was headed by the UK's former National Security Advisor (NSA), Stephen Lovegrove. Although the findings of the review were not publicly released, Lovegrove's subsequent media engagements in July 2025 offered key insights about the country's position on the AUKUS following the review. In his interactions with the Australian media,

Lovegrove expressed optimism regarding the UK's unwavering support for both pillars of the AUKUS, that is, submarine construction and advanced technologies.[23] He highlighted that the review focused particularly on the timely implementation of the submarine roadmap, given the critical role the UK plays in its final stage. As a result, the UK had plans to invest at least US$ 4.7 billion into Barrow Shipyard, where the first submarine under the AUKUS partnership was set to be constructed and delivered to Australia. Subsequently, the UK also had plans to build up to 12 submarines of this class for both Australia and its own navy as part of its broader security strategy across the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific regions. The UK's unwavering support for the AUKUS was attributed by Lovegrove to his government's broader interpretation of the partnership that goes beyond the narrow prism of a military initiative. According to him, the UK viewed the AUKUS as a larger industrial endeavour with the potential to generate thousands of jobs and significant economic opportunities for its citizens.[24]

In line with this vision, the UK signed a bilateral agreement with Australia on 26 July 2025, known as the Geelong Treaty. The Geelong Treaty seeks to establish a comprehensive framework based upon which both the UK and Australia will coordinate the co-production of nuclear submarines under the AUKUS treaty over the next 50 years. It aims to establish guidelines for co-development, joint construction, operation and disposal of the new class of SSNs.[25] In spite of this string of positive developments, the British shipyards also face challenges similar to those encountered by their American counterparts. Although the British government has set an ambitious target of constructing at least one submarine every 18 months, the successful realisation of this objective can be hindered by the current sub-optimal capacity of its shipyards. Therefore, the UK's ability to fulfil its commitments to Australia under the AUKUS pact will largely depend on its capability to bring about a substantial expansion of its domestic submarine industrial base.

Smooth Sailing or Rough Seas Ahead for the AUKUS?

In the three consecutive years after its inception, the AUKUS successfully managed to achieve tangible progress in its core objective of enabling Australia to acquire SSN capability. This progress included the successful completion of initial 18-month consultative phase, which resulted in the establishment of a concrete roadmap for submarine construction and the creation of a legal framework for transferring NNP technology to Australia. However, this momentum appears to have been disrupted in 2025, with the advent of Trump

administration and its subsequent actions. The Pentagon's review, along with the scepticism expressed at the highest echelons of the US naval community, has indeed cast a cloud of uncertainty over the implementation of AUKUS's submarine roadmap. However, the possibility of these developments leading to derailment of the entire AUKUS pact remains highly unlikely. This is particularly evident given the continued progress made this year in both the initial and final phases of the submarine roadmap. As envisaged in the first phase, the US nuclear submarines have been regularly docking at Western Australian ports for maintenance since August 2024. These visits are intended to help prepare Australian naval bases to host American and British nuclear submarines from 2027 onwards. Similarly, the signing of the Geelong Treaty between Australia and the UK marks a significant milestone in the implementation of the final phase of the roadmap. In this context, the uncertainty surrounding the AUKUS appears largely confined to the second phase of the roadmap. This uncertainty mostly emerges from the constraints faced by the American submarine industrial base and does not reflect any erosion of strategic alignment among the three AUKUS nations.

Even prior to the unveiling of the submarine roadmap, critics of the AUKUS had flagged concerns about Australia's impending capability gap in the interregnum before it eventually acquires SSNs by the late 2030s. They cited this gap as a key indicator that the AUKUS pact is bound to degrade Australia's maritime capability and increase its reliance on the US, thereby compromising its strategic autonomy. However, the history of bilateral relations between the US and Australia has been consistently marked by their strong strategic alignment. This was subsequently reaffirmed through the unveiling of the submarine roadmap, in which the US pledged to transfer its own SSNs to Australia as an interim measure. While practical constraints have since emerged in fulfilling that commitment, it remains unlikely that these challenges would prompt the US to completely abandon the AUKUS pact. Rather, the AUKUS nations are more likely to pursue alternative solutions to navigate this challenge.

As far as Australia's maritime deterrence capability is concerned, the planned basing of American and British SSNs in Western Australia from 2027 is primarily intended to address this issue. Moreover, the US stands to gain significantly from the AUKUS as the pact provides an inflow of Australian funding and resources to expand its own domestic shipbuilding ecosystem. Additionally, the AUKUS establishes additional maintenance hubs for American submarines operating in the Indo-Pacific, a region that has been identified as a strategic priority in the US National Security Strategy. Hence,

the constraints faced by the US in fulfilling its commitments to Australia under the AUKUS pact will most likely result in inducing minor adjustments to the submarine roadmap. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that the AUKUS will invariably sail through the tumultuous period of the Trump presidency.

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