

A MOMENT OF RECKONING FOR AUKUS AND AUSTRALIA

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'The developments surrounding AUKUS are instructive for Indian observers.' | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

The week ahead is likely to be crucial for Australia. An announcement about an “optimal pathway” for [AUKUS — the security partnership between the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom](#) — is on the horizon, with implications for Australia’s plans to operate a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines within the next decade. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has called it “the single biggest leap in defence capability in Australia’s history”.

Officials in Canberra, however, are still concerned. Their country requires a favourable path to develop deterrence capabilities against potential adversaries, but even the most positive outcome of the AUKUS consultations is not without drawbacks. The main issue for Australia is that many of its regional partners oppose the Royal Australian Navy operating nuclear attack submarines. Some, such as Indonesia, have been open about their reservations. Others, such as India, despite being politically supportive of AUKUS, appear conflicted about the prospect of these submarines operating in the regional littorals.

For its part, Canberra has attempted to assuage concerns by explaining to its counterparts in regional capitals that AUKUS does not provide Australia with nuclear weapons capability, but is rather a means of acquiring nuclear maritime propulsion. Officials have even attempted to distinguish AUKUS from other groups such as the Quad (India, the U.S, Japan, Australia). Canberra describes the Quad as a normative grouping that lays out a vision for the region and AUKUS as a more technical arrangement.

The clarification notwithstanding, AUKUS remains a military pact with the potential to shape the strategic contours of maritime Asia. Following consultations between AUKUS partners in recent months, three main options have emerged. The first, which Australian officials hope will be the chosen pathway, is for the U.S. to build nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) for Australia. As much as Canberra would like it, many U.S. policymakers seem sceptical about this option.

Two top U.S. Senators wrote to President Joe Biden in January this year, urging him not to sell nuclear submarines to Australia, warning that it would jeopardise U.S. national security given the

vessels' scarcity. With the country facing problems with nuclear submarine construction, the possibility of the U.S. building SSNs for Australia appears rather remote.

The second option is for the U.K. to expand its Astute-class programme to Australia. Here, too, there is a hitch. The U.K. is constructing its Dreadnought-class ballistic-missile submarine (SSBN) programme while designing the Astute-class replacement in a sequential build process. Even if Australia acquired an Astute-class submarine, integrating the onboard combat system would be difficult due to differences between the current Australian and American fleets.

The third and perhaps most likely option is a trilateral effort to develop a new nuclear submarine design. Canberra could announce a modified version of the yet-to-be-launched U.S. Next-Generation Attack Submarine or U.K. Submersible Ship Nuclear Replacement (SSNR) programmes, or even a completely new AUKUS-class design to be acquired by all three countries.

This path, too, is not without challenges, the biggest of which is that Australia has to figure out how to get around U.S. export controls. Critics say the U.S.'s stringent export control and protocol regime could jeopardise the technology transfer agreement, particularly in areas related to undersea capabilities and electronic warfare. To operationalise the pact, the only way forward is to reform the U.S. export control regime by creating a "carve-out" of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR). That, experts say, is easier said than done.

The developments surrounding AUKUS are instructive for Indian observers. Even with its closest allies, the U.S. is facing difficulties transferring technology. It is not that Washington does not want to help a partner; it is more that the U.S. export control system is so rigid and archaic that it cannot make room for the priority transfer of know-how to a trusted ally. For India, which has never been in the same league of U.S. partners as Australia, acquiring critical technology from the U.S. remains a more daunting prospect.

The other lesson is that nuclear technology is difficult under the international system. For Australia to operate nuclear-powered submarines with high-enriched uranium (HEU) fuelled reactors, it will have to exploit a loophole that allows non-nuclear weapon countries to withdraw the fissile material required for submarine reactors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)-monitored stockpile.

The removal, experts say, could set a dangerous precedent, allowing potential proliferators to use naval reactors as a cover for future nuclear weapons development. One option, of course, is for Australian submarines to have a lifetime reactor core, but it is unclear if such an arrangement would be viable or, indeed, acceptable to Canberra.

Acquiring nuclear propulsion technology is likely to be also complicated for India, which is not a party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The complexities involved in the transfer of technology for HEU-fuelled reactors in nuclear attack submarines from the U.S. and U.K., leave India with only one practical option: buying a high-power reactor from France. The miniaturised low-enriched uranium (LEU) reactor core for SSNs, though a workable alternative for India, would however impose its own limitations in terms of Indian dependence on France for reactor fuel and the need for periodic refuelling. The developments with AUKUS are then well worth watching.

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