CHINA'S BASTION STRATEGY: AUKUS AND AUSTRALIA'S CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL POSITION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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ABSTRACT

The strategic outlook of Australia has evolved over the last two decades due to the Chinese military's growth in the Indo-Pacific region. This has been driven by Beijing's growing influence and its efforts to reshape regional dynamics. This research employs a qualitative approach to analyse China's Bastion strategy, conceptualised through the Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) framework. It also incorporates the Australian concept of "anti-access denial" and "area denial" as distinct strategic approaches. The AUKUS alliance between the US, UK, and Australia is crucial in navigating the complex Indo-Pacific waters. Nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS are intended to enhance deterrence capabilities and empower Australia strategically. Lastly, this research will address the uncertainties surrounding Australia's response to the nuclear non-proliferation regime as a non-nuclear-weapon state and provide recommendations regarding the SSN loophole in the NPT.

Keywords: AUKUS, SSN, SSBN, Indo-Pacific, A2/AD.

INTRODUCTION

Australia is an essential Indo-Pacific state, bounded by the Pacific and Indian Oceans to the east and west, respectively, and in the north by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The concept of the Indo-Pacific has been utilised by Australian governments since 2012, which outlines the security and foreign policy priorities. Australia ensures its security in the region through Five Eyes (FVEY) and other intelligence alliances with the US, the UK, and New Zealand. This contested region remained the top priority of Australia in the post-Cold War era as well, which was demonstrated by the AUKUS security and technology alliance with the UK and the US announced in 2021. Australia was the first nation to utilise the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical concept to frame its larger region (Parry, 2022).

This region's geopolitical landscape has evolved even more with China's recognition as a powerful global force. China's growing military capabilities and increasingly assertive maritime posture have generated concern among the US and its regional allies, while Beijing portrays these capabilities as necessary to protect its maritime approaches and strategic interests. As a major power, the US has a strong strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific theatre. The US "Indo-Pacific strategy" has strongly ensured the security of this space because it is home to two-thirds of the world's economy. It also highlighted China's

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military dominance in the region. To deal with upcoming threats in the region, the US will work with regional institutions, partners, and allies to achieve a rule-based order (The White House, 2022). The UK supports a free Indo-Pacific theatre for a regional balance of power, ensuring an adaptive regional order. It seeks to reinforce strategic ties with Australia and New Zealand through AUKUS and the Five Eyes Partnership in the region (HM Government, 2023).

Australia is also concerned about Chinese military dominance in the region, which created a security dilemma for the UK, US, and especially for Australia, as it lies close to the first island chain. Australian defence white papers frequently asserted the need to secure their air and sea gap within the first and second island chains by using power to protect their continent and offshore islands, especially to the east and west of the Australian continent. The 1987 defence white paper pointed out the contested environment of these chains due to the Chinese presence. The 2016 defence white paper also addresses military modernisation of regional powers, especially China. The paper also highlighted the Australian security dilemma posed by submarine modernisation programmes of Indo-Pacific states. The 2023 Defence Strategic Review also reinforced China's massive build-up near Australian waters, especially its naval capabilities. It also highlights concerns regarding China’s expanding A2/AD capabilities, along with Chinese efforts to secure the SCS surrounding waters to protect its nuclear submarine operations, resembling a bastion-style maritime defence posture. So, Australia's defence review reinforced its commitment to improve Indo-Pacific engagement with the UK, including through AUKUS and other naval capabilities (Department of Defence, 2016; Department of Defence, 2023; Department of Defence, 1987).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is structured as follows: First, this research provides the strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific. This research underscores the significant developments that China has created bastions in near seas, such as Australian waters and the First Island Chain. It also incorporates that China, through its bastion strategy in near seas and A2/AD capabilities, revolutionises its defensive maritime zones and moves towards a nuclear triad posture within this framework. It also highlights the Australian A2/AD concept and how Australia utilises SSN-AUKUS to deter China's access in critical waters and secure sea routes. This research is based on qualitative research methodology, primarily utilising document analysis and legal interpretivism. This involves a systematic review of legal instruments such as the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and comprehensive safeguards agreements of Australia and the UK, as well as the US, and working papers such as the NPT Review Conference. The research identifies strategic legal friction. It will provide insights into how military necessity to counter and bypass A2/AD and the bastion strategy of China forces Australia to move towards a more secure denial approach and derive technical requirements for nuclear submarines, which in turn complicates the verification mechanism of the IAEA. This dual normative approach evaluated the verification paradox in Article 14 from both legal and strategic perspectives. Furthermore, it also develops policy recommendations that balance Australia’s defence needs with its international non-proliferation responsibilities.

CHOPPY WATERS: WHY IS AUSTRALIA CHOOSING THE AUKUS PARTNERSHIP?

➢ BASTION STRATEGY

To secure the first island chain and beyond, China is trying to create bastions with A2/AD capabilities to create a layered, in-depth defence. Bastions are highly protected maritime zones that house states' nuclear submarines and strategic nuclear forces, which are developed by China near Yulin and other bases in the South China and East China Seas. In the maritime domain, the bastion is also known as sea denial or area denial. China is applying A2/AD capabilities by securing a bastion near its coast by employing sea defence systems, fast attack submarines, shore-based strike aircraft, land-based missile batteries, and ocean surveillance systems, with the deployment of air wings and surface combatants, and trying to deny the enemy (US and its allies) freedom of movement in the contested battlespace. To ensure its security and deny access and operationality to its enemy in conflict, China has advanced air defence and surveillance systems. The KJ-2000 and Y-9 provide intelligence gathering and submarine detection, helping China to monitor naval activities across the SCS.

China also strengthens its bastion and anti-access bubble by deploying anti-ship ballistic missiles such as DF-21 and DF-26, which directly target enemy naval assets such as Nimitz-class aircraft carriers, making it difficult for enemy fleets to operate near Chinese-controlled waters. Its advanced warships, such as the Type 052 destroyer and Type 055 destroyer, provide strong air and surface defence capabilities. China has also improved its amphibious warfare capabilities using a landing platform dock. For bastions and for full integration of A2/AD capabilities, submarines are crucial for Chinese denial and deterrence capabilities. China has developed fortified naval infrastructure, including underground submarine pens at bases such as Yulin Naval Base, to enhance the survivability and operational security of its nuclear-powered submarine fleet. The submarine deployment provides China with a tactical advantage during a crisis. For the Chinese, the denial and bastion strategy at naval facilities on Hainan Island – Yulin Base and Longpo Naval Base is crucial for China, as they provide submarine tunnels, underground caverns, deep water ports capable of supporting aircraft carriers, surface combatants and strategic nuclear submarines.

Thus, Hainan Island is viewed as a possible "Bastion" for China's ballistic missile submarines and ensures second-strike capability, sea denial, and sea control operations in the SCS. In addition, China has deployed Shenyang J-11 fighter aircraft on Woody Island to extend air power in the region and it has the potential to host DF-series ballistic missiles capable of targeting naval forces. They also militarised Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef by building radar systems, airstrips, and military facilities and eventually these outposts supported enforcement of the Chinese Air Identification Zone, which enhances China's bastion strategy along with A2/AD capabilities (Venugopal, 2020). For anti-access, China has land-attack ballistic and cruise missiles that can attack Guam. They also have anti-ship cruise missiles as well as ballistic missile variants with re-entry vehicle technology, with the ability to strike and bypass sea-based missile defence platforms. The YJ-100 is an ASCM, while YJ-12 and YJ-18 anti-ship cruise missiles are supersonic with extended range capabilities (China's Anti-Access/Area

Denial, 2018). China also unveiled the YJ-15, a new anti-ship missile that seems to combine supersonic speed and long range to counter conventional naval defence such as gun-based close-in weapon systems and attack aircraft carriers. It is meant for air launch, most likely from the fleet of H-6 strategic bombers of the PLA Air Force (China enhances A2/AD posture in Indo-Pacific with new anti-ship effectors, 2025).

China also established a pier and repair facilities at Dinghai and Zhoushan naval bases in the East China Sea and expanded its Xiangshan naval base for an underground submarine tunnel and upgraded Danyang naval air base, along with missile batteries at the Paracel and Spratly islands (Chang, 2022). China adopted the bastion system to enhance its offensive capabilities, which provides operational capabilities in the first and second island chains (Lacey, 2020). China's nuclear submarine, a Type 094A, provides strategic nuclear deterrence and second-strike capability. Another significant submarine is the JL-2 submarine-launched ballistic missile, which can deliver up to three nuclear warheads to a target up to 7200 km away. The JL-1 SLBM that was used aboard the Type 092 submarine was superseded by the JL-2. In addition to having better sails, the new Type 094A may have 16 launch tubes in total. Additionally, it might be equipped with the new JL-2A ballistic missile, which has a much longer range than the JL-2 and could potentially reach every country in the US from the Hainan Island Yulin naval base. The Type 094 is a second-generation nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine designed to increase fighting capability at sea. Armed with JL-2 and maybe JL-3 missiles, they pose a danger to American territories such as Alaska, Guam, and Hawaii.

In the SCS, Beijing currently regularly sends its force of Type 094 missile boats on fully armed nuclear deterrent patrols. Since the Type 094/094A is still the only Chinese navy ship used for nuclear weapons launches, the Department of Defence of the US claims that the platform is Beijing's "first credible sea-based nuclear deterrent" (Suciu, 2024). China has also upgraded its unmanned underwater vehicles. The first Chinese ROV is called "Hai Ren No. 1". It has produced a wide range of AUVs, including the Water-Whale 2000, Qianlong Haishen Haiyi, and Weilong series, which are used for surveying and mapping beneath the water (Bhuvesha, 2023). It also showcased a new generation of advanced anti-ship missiles to strengthen its naval warfare and A2/AD capabilities. The YJ-15 supersonic missile can be carried by Shenyang J-15 fighter aircraft operating from Chinese aircraft carriers with low-altitude sea-skimming flight, making detection and interception difficult for the enemy.

The other hypersonic anti-ship missile is a boost-glide missile equipped with a first-stage booster and performs sudden trajectory changes, making interception extremely difficult. It can be launched from vertical launch systems installed on warships such as the Type 052D destroyer and Type 055 destroyer. The YJ-19 hypersonic cruise missile can attack naval and land targets. The YJ-20 and YJ-18C hypersonic missiles, in combination with ballistic missiles, can strike targets such as aircraft carriers. It was reported that they can be deployed from submarines and Xian H-6k bombers. All these missiles enhanced Chinese naval defence with multiple strike options, flight profiles, and launch platforms and created an integrated defence shield (Global Times, 2025). Chinese police officers are working on capacity building in Kiribati and the Solomon Islands. Moreover, Tonga and Chinese police are collaborating through the "Pacific Island Forum Summit" (Keen, 2024). The expansion of Chinese military infrastructure in the

SCS can be interpreted as contributing to an increasingly integrated A2/AD architecture alongside the development of China's nuclear triad. This evolution shows the Chinese intent to achieve an assured second-strike capability. There are layers of China's defensive shield consisting of China's A2/AD network, maritime bastions, and nuclear triad.

The physical bastion is the South China Sea, where China uses A2/AD assets such as land-based missiles, sensors, and air defence systems to turn the sea into a defensive no-go zone for the enemy. The significant sanctuary is Type 094 SSBN and other submarines with Yulin and Longpo naval bases and fortified infrastructure. The integration of the JL-3 ballistic missile allows these vessels to hold continental targets while protected within their maritime corridors. The aerial triad will be completed with the integration of the JH-XX and H-20 long-range stealth strategic bombers. This will provide power projection to China across the second island chain to Guam, adding a layer of strategic signalling that China previously lacked. This triad-based posture affects the US and its allies' power in the Indo-Pacific region. China also enhanced its bomber programs, which show its growing ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region.

The first is the H-20 long-range stealth strategic bomber, and the second is the under-development JH-XX medium-range stealth strike aircraft. H-20 could potentially target US military locations, such as Guam and the wider Indo-Pacific, and carry both conventional and nuclear-based capabilities. It also enhanced the Chinese nuclear triad and strengthened its deterrence posture. At the regional level, JH-XX focuses on precision strikes, anti-surface warfare, medium range capability. Combined with island building and the modernisation of naval capabilities, China is constantly challenging Indo-Pacific states. In this framework, the triad provides nuclear insurance, the bastion provides geographic sanctuary, and A2/AD provides tactical denial. For regional actors like Australia, the primary driver is the AUKUS partnership. China's transition and power projection have increased the security dilemma for Australia, as its closest maritime island within the island chains. Australia has moved towards impactful denial capabilities, and the most important step towards this is SSN-AUKUS's high-end undersea capability.

AUSTRALIAN STRATEGIC A2/AD CONCEPTS

The evolution of Australian maritime doctrine is fundamentally rooted in the tension between two primary schools of strategic thought. Both schools serve the national interest but differ in their operational approach to "sea denial". Australia has executed both A2/AD strategies for greater geographical reach. Paul Dibb's school of strategic thought, which Australia refers to as "anti-access denial," is frequently linked to a denial strategy. The idea of denial was first explicitly brought into the Australian strategic language in the 1986 Dibb Review. To put it briefly, anti-access denial aims to prevent an adversary from assaulting the continent by having the armed capacity to halt them when they pass the air-sea gap to the northern part of Australia. It focuses on the physical barrier of geography to deter an invasion. Within Australian strategic thought, there is a second school of thought. This defensive tactic is known as the 'area-denial' technique. Hugh White has been its most outspoken supporter; he finds inspiration in maritime combat, particularly "sea denial".

Though it functions over several domains, including the sea, the air, and the land, area denial is essentially like sea denial. By making it too dangerous for an adversary to close within striking distance of the Australian mainland, area denial aims to dissuade them. Priority assets like troop transports, aircraft carriers, and amphibious assault ships are presumed to be avoided by adversaries in areas with a high likelihood of their destruction. Area denial aims to deny the adversary the confidence to put their valuable assets at serious risk of being lost rather than to prevent them from accomplishing their goal. A2 denial deters by persuading the possible assailant that their attempt is probably going to be unsuccessful. AD discourages behaviour by making it very risky rather than impossible (Lockyer & Cohen, 2017). To create an A2/AD environment in the Indo-Pacific region, Australia, the US, and the UK launched AUKUS, and they are positioned perfectly to rule the oceans. Being the only island in the world that faces both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, the US's maritime superiority not only makes it difficult to launch a conventional attack on the US mainland but also allows the powerful US Navy to move freely in both the Atlantic and Pacific once land warfare is removed. Britain's naval might is still the strongest in Europe. AUKUS, which is supported by the US and protected by Europe, enables the UK to defend and secure the Atlantic and conquer the Pacific in times of defence and offense. Australia's remoteness and isolation will be immediately transformed into a vital strategic advantage once it acquires nuclear submarines.

Australia's geographical location, along with the South Pacific and Indian Oceans, provides the best security barriers for nuclear submarines to manoeuvre and help the USA to block enemies at the First Island Chain (M.Cheng, 2022). Australia sought to strengthen its submarine capabilities (the Collins class did not meet Navy requirements). The US has been able to provide Australia with advanced military technology in fields like military drones and hypersonic missiles, and enhance the UK's partnership with them (Cheng, 2022). Through AUKUS, the US and the UK intended to operate more than five nuclear-powered submarines from HMAS Stirling near Perth (starting in 2027). In Northern Australia, together with the "US Marine rotational force", AUKUS is intended to strengthen deterrence and extend allied maritime capabilities in the western Pacific and Indian Ocean. The capability of SSNs is significantly greater than that of diesel-electric boats. Regarding endurance, sensor size, speed endurance, weapon loads, and operational flexibility and without battery restrictions (Babbage, 2024).

To steady the work on AUKUS on February 8, 2022, the "Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement" was signed. It allowed AUKUS partners to exchange knowledge on naval nuclear propulsion. Australian authorities have been actively interacting with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regarding the non-proliferation facet. Australians are keen to improve their AI, cyber, and electronic warfare capabilities through the "AUKUS Undersea Robotics Autonomous Systems" project, a specialised project within AUKUS pillar II (The White House, 2022). The AUKUS partners and senior officials examined different options to achieve the goals of Pillar 1 of AUKUS. In 2023, a phased approach was announced for the SSN AUKUS capability. Firstly, American and British personnel and Australian civilians and naval personnel will be trained through frequent visits of navies to Australian ports; secondly, the procurement of three Virginia (SSN-774) class submarines from the US and forward

rotations of American and British SSNs to Australia starting in 2027; thirdly, the build-out of a British-based SSN-AUKUS submarine. Furthermore, the cornerstone of the AUKUS program is the defunct British Submarine Nuclear Replacement Program, which aimed to provide an alternative to the Royal Navy's Astute-class boats. BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce were each given contracts worth GBP 85 million to complete three years of conceptual design studies for the submarine platform and its nuclear propulsion in September 2021.

This SSNR conceptual study will serve as the foundation for SSN-AUKUS, which will also leverage certain U.S. submarine technology. According to reports, these consist of armaments, a common vertical launch system, and propulsion plant components. Additionally, the AUKUS partners want to create a collaborative fighting system that is an evolution of the AN/BYG-1 Fighting Control System. In March 2024, the framework for the future development and maintenance of SSN-AUKUS was announced. To produce the new submarines, it has been decided that BAE Systems and ASC Pty Ltd, the Collins class constructors, will collaborate (AUKUS Submarine, 2024). To facilitate defence trade between Australia and the UK, the US Congress included a path to a historic export control exemption in the Fiscal Year 2024 "National Defence Authorisation Act". Australia passed the "Defence Trade Controls Amendment Act 2024," which grants the US and the UK a reciprocal national exemption. The Open General Export License Program of the UK will also be reformed for the US and Australia by the UK authorities.

Most defence supplies will be able to be moved or removed across the three nations with combined procedures. All three parties also recognised the establishment of the "Advanced Capabilities Industry Forum". AUKUS partners launched the Pillar II (2026) Innovation Challenge on electronic warfare (US Department of Defence, 2024). Pillar II of the AUKUS collaboration would also entail the development of submarines as well as SSN-AUKUS to launch and recover uncrewed underwater vehicles via torpedo tube. The Leidos/L3Harris Iver4 autonomous underwater vehicle serves as the foundation for the AUKUS "Torpedo Tube Launch & Recovery system." It might offer a means of improving a submarine's capabilities and enabling it to launch small UUVs or AUVs without requiring another platform or a boat to surface to recover a vehicle (Suciu, 2024).

The AUKUS Torpedo Tube Launch and Recovery system capability, which will be provided for the Royal Navy under Project Scylla, can be installed on any submarine. According to Rear Admiral Parkin, "It gives an SSN its own offboard system". For security and for a better understanding of each other's capabilities, the AUKUS partners are also working on critical underwater infrastructure security (Willett, 2024). Australia and the UK are working on a bilateral treaty to produce a new nuclear class of submarines under the AUKUS partnership, along with the US (Reuters, 2024). Under AUKUS, the procurement of nuclear-powered submarines directly addresses the limitations of both classes. Unlike Collins-class submarines, SSNs provide power, speed, and endurance to operate at great distances. SSNs move Australia's defensive line from the northern coast to the first island chain and support Australian forces to block the enemy far from the Australian mainland, thus supporting anti-access and denial. However, area denial is supported by the integration of AUKUS Pillar II technologies,

such as Autonomous underwater vehicles and torpedo launch systems, which enhance the lethal reach of submarines. This creates a high-threat, highly dangerous operational area, fulfilling the goal of making maritime incursions prohibitively risky.

AUSTRALIA'S APPROACH TO NUCLEAR SECURITY

By signing the "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons" (NPT) in February 1970, Australia pledged to refrain from nuclear weapons development and to assist with non-proliferation initiatives. The IAEA is essential in backing the NPT by advocating for the use of peaceful nuclear technology and implementing global safeguards. In 1974, Australia strengthened its commitment by signing a "Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement" with the IAEA, followed by an Additional Protocol in 1997 to further improve verification measures. In 2010, Australia co-founded the "Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative" with Japan. This group works to improve transparency, strengthen the NPT review process, advance disarmament verification, reduce nuclear risks, and promote nuclear safety. Australia served as the NPDI's coordinator from 2018 to 2020. In September 2021, the NPDI submitted the "Landing Zone" paper, aimed at guiding discussions at the 2022 NPT Review Conference, where members renewed their commitment to fully implementing the NPT (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017).

Moreover, NPT describes nuclear material as "nuclear weapons", "other nuclear explosive devices", or "peaceful nuclear activities". The NPT document doesn't define these terms. In simple words, the NPT text is unclear about the status of SSNs. The ambiguity first implies that sharing nuclear technology for use in SSNs would be against the NPT's ban on exchanging explosives or weapons. A closer look at the treaty, however, reveals that using or transferring SSNs ought to be seen as a peaceful activity that calls for the implementation of safeguards. This interpretation hinges on whether SSN propulsion falls under "peaceful nuclear activities" or "nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices (Blum, 2023). To move beyond this descriptive ambiguity, the AUKUS partners should advocate for the IAEA General Conference to adopt a universal naval propulsion protocol. This would establish the AUKUS model by transferring nuclear fuel in welded, lifelong power units as the mandatory global benchmark. By codifying this into legal practice, the regime can close the SSN loophole permanently, preventing other non-nuclear-weapon states from using naval propulsion for reprocessing activities by providing legal justification for their enrichment activities (IAEA, 2025).

Additionally, the NPT highlights the procedures that confirm that nuclear programs and materials, including uranium, and their utilisation technology must be evaluated by the IAEA. This is done even in the case of use for peaceful purposes. Australia has quite a few subsidiary agreements with the IAEA that define how these safeguard agreements are operated. Nuclear-powered engines that belong to Australia under AUKUS follow the official rules of the agreement and the subsidiary agreements as well, regardless of anyone's opinions. One can be under the assumption that the phrase "peaceful purposes" does not include the utilisation of military submarine propulsion. Nevertheless, the concept prioritises the adoption of nuclear material for purposes that go beyond the development, procurement, testing, or deployment of nuclear weapons.

Australia has plans to acquire nuclear-powered submarines that will not transport nuclear weapons, only conventional ones.

That is a practice undertaken by all AUKUS partners. Australia's treaty with the IAEA clarifies what comes under the treaty and the concept of peaceful purposes. The 'non-proscribed military purposes' are allowed as per Article 14 of this agreement. According to the Australian government, this means that nuclear material can be used to power nuclear-powered naval vessels. That utilisation is not related in any way to nuclear weapons or explosives. This interpretation sets a troubling precedent that nuclear materials, which are not controlled by the IAEA, can be used to develop weapons (Sanders, 2023). Furthermore, legal critique of Article 14 reveals a significant "verification paradox" within this framework. The article allows withdrawal of nuclear material, but it requires special arrangements without automatic exemption, and the special arrangement must be negotiated between the state and the agency. There is a significant legal challenge: once material is withdrawn, agency oversight will be suspended. It will become a permanent blind spot for the non-proliferation regime to prevent this, any subsidiary arrangement must move beyond descriptive reporting. It must legally systemise the use of managed access and continuous remote monitoring of sealed unit reactors.

This ensures that sovereign military secrecy does not take precedence over the international community's right to verify that highly enriched uranium is used solely for propulsion and is not diverted for explosive or nuclear weapons purposes (Kong & Liu, 2026). Australia is also a party to the Treaty of Rarotonga, which is recognised as the South Pacific nuclear-free zone treaty (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017). Also, all parties are on board to completely safeguard the conditions of nuclear non-proliferation. Australia, the US, and the UK have agreed that Australia will be the recipient of sealed units of nuclear power for its submarines. This will enable them to require no refuelling during their operational lifespan. There will be no development, enrichment, or reprocessing of any nuclear fuel for said submarines by Australia. Australia is a Non-Nuclear-Weapon State under the NPT. As per that role, Australia is bound to have an inspection of its nuclear materials by the IAEA. This is done to ensure that they are not misused for weapons. Australia also follows the Additional Inspection Protocol of the IAEA and the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement, which is applied to all non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS). Article III of the bans Australia in the mandate that all "source or special fissionable materials" in a state's possession will be subject to inspection by the IAEA to ensure that there is no diversion for the development of nuclear weapons (Bell, 2023).

The US defends its choice to provide nuclear submarines to Australia under "Section 123 of the US Atomic Energy Act," which governs nuclear cooperation agreements with foreign states. In other areas, such as technological exchanges, scientific research, and conversations about safeguards, agreements constructed under this statute elevate collaboration. The advancement of US non-proliferation principles is advanced due to the 123 agreements when utilised in connection with other non-proliferation instruments, mainly the NPT. As a result, a legal foundation for significant nuclear cooperation with other nations is created (Cheema, 2021). An older agreement that allowed naval nuclear propulsion information has been replaced by a new one in August

2024, which allows nuclear material transfer to Australia. The new agreement will remain in force until 31st December 2075, but the parties are allowed to end it by giving at least one year's written notice.

The other nations have "the right to require the return or destruction of any information, material, and equipment" that has already been replaced in the event of one party violating or ending the pact. There are many protections highlighted in the agreement, one of which is the condition that Australia agrees with the IAEA, the world's watchdog, prior to the UK or the US transferring any nuclear material to Australia. "Nuclear material must only be utilised for marine nuclear propulsion and must be shipped to Australia in 'complete, welded power units. The US and UK have the right to stop cooperation if Australia materially breaches its obligations and sets off a nuclear explosive device under the NPT and Australia has agreed to it (Hurst, 2024).

CONCLUSION

In the Indo-Pacific, AUKUS marks the emerging regional power dynamics, as Australia has deepened its strategic alignment with the US and UK. AUKUS strengthens the Western security framework and counterbalances China's growing influence in the Pacific Islands, the South China Sea, etc. AUKUS will enhance Australia's air and sea gap vulnerability and deny its adversaries in future conflicts. If AUKUS fully became operational in the future, then it would deny, deter, and create bastions for Australia as a remote island at the crossroads of the Indo-Pacific Ocean. It will also provide the UK and the US with the ability to control and secure their maritime interests in the region and beyond. In addition, AUKUS may inadvertently contribute to a global perception of nuclear proliferation because Australia, as a signatory country to the NPT and the Treaty of Rarotonga, is pursuing nuclear-powered submarines. The loophole discussed in the NPT regarding the SSN also raises questions for international regimes on how they would define it. However, Australia tried its best to adhere to the protocols of the treaty. The future of AUKUS will depend on its ability to balance strategic objectives with regulatory and political constraints. The AUKUS alliance will probably either solidify its position as a pillar of regional security or encounter difficulties that could jeopardise its cohesion and efficacy in the ensuing decades.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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