



Australia and the United Kingdom: an Indo-Pacific security agenda for a revitalised partnership

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that two middle powers in possession of substantial capabilities, shared values and convergent interests will have much to gain from closer security cooperation. Australia and the United Kingdom (UK) are renewing their partnership for the competitive setting of the 21st century, especially the systemic challenge by authoritarian powers to a liberal international order. This reimagined alignment was underscored by the announcement in September 2021 of AUKUS: their partnership with the United States on nuclear-powered submarines and other advanced technologies.

The UK and Australia are not formal allies, and face differences as well as similarities in security priorities. Still, their combined strategic weight is considerable. They have respectively the world's 5th and 13th largest economies, and 5th and 12th largest defence budgets, with exceptional intelligence and cyber capabilities. These advantages are augmented by strong records in mobilising diplomatic coalitions for the international common good, plus distinct strengths in education, innovation, political institutions and resilience. Differences in their economies and geographies are more a point of complementarity (leveraged in the new Free Trade Agreement) than a source of weakness or indifference.

Enhanced Australia-UK partnership is thus a lot more than political talk or alleged Anglosphere nostalgia. It makes sense, beyond even the bonds of history, kindred political systems, a tapestry of personal connections and revitalised economic links.

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Regarding security, a deep sense of trust is reflected in an intimacy and longstanding intelligence relationship, institutional links between the armed forces, and almost continuous operational experience as allies or partners in combat, stabilisation and counter-terrorism missions.

All of this pre-dates and ranges beyond AUKUS. Yet this is a relationship prone to fluctuations of political expectation, compounded by a tendency to take each other for granted. For instance, we have recently exited a phase where the potential for the UK as a security actor in Asia may have been underestimated in Australia, given London's focus on other regions and its delayed (if irreversible) recognition of China as a major source of strategic risk. Now converse questions arise. What is a realistic ambition for the UK's contribution to a balance in the Indo-Pacific? How to manage expectations? Such questions factor in the priority the UK must place on Russia as a present threat, and the difficult calculations all democracies make in facing China.

An audacious decision like AUKUS shows a focus on forward-looking realities: a willingness to stake a position now (and incur diplomatic fallout) to advance shared interests in the face of growing future risk. The similarities in contemporary Australian and British geopolitical assessments are striking. London's 2021 Integrated Review warned of systemic competition between states over interests, norms and values, with an emphasis on China as well as Russia. Canberra's 2020 Defence Strategic Update highlighted the deterioration of Australia's strategic environment, driven by China's coercive power. These judgements are informing a new toughness and expansiveness in the thinking of both governments: beyond shoring up the status quo, and recognising the need to exert influence, build new coalitions and shape the security environment.

This translates into decisions about force modernisation and deployments as well as a purposeful reorientation of international partnerships.

Both sides need to gauge precisely what they can expect from one another in an age of multiple dangers and partnerships. The objective now should be to lock in priorities for a practical agenda that balances ambition and realism. This can help future-proof the relationship against political shifts on either side, given that geopolitical threats and defence capability responses will be measured in decades.

All the will in the world won't reduce the physical distance from London to Canberra, or the fact that both nations face crowded horizons of hazard, distinct national pressures and the perpetual policy dynamism that comes with democracy. At the same time, a post-Brexit UK with a global outlook has recognised the Indo-Pacific as the international system's new centre of gravity – in security as well as economics and population. The UK is demonstrating capability and intent to show presence in Indo-Pacific waters. This involves not only its 2021 deployment of a carrier strike group, but the commitment to establish a Littoral Response Group (South), an upgrade to its base in Bahrain, and the deployment of two roaming offshore patrol vessels in the Indo-Pacific for the next five years and Type 31 frigates later in the decade. And the UK's wider security footprint is not just about ships and bases. It is committed to many fields of competition – including cyber, critical technologies and protecting democratic institutions – that are global in scope.

A realistic agenda for Australia-UK security cooperation will play to national strengths and cover multiple dimensions. It will involve enhanced bilateralism to strengthen each other's capacities and make the relationship at least the sum of its parts. This will be reinforced by multilateral cooperation, not only through technology under AUKUS but also in other diplomatic groups. And these elements will combine with global and regional coordination on shared challenges – a division of labour involving many other partners.

As middle-powers with similar worldviews, Australia and the UK do not have sufficient resources individually or together to defend all their shared interests. Instead, they should look beyond the boundaries of immediate national interest and think creatively about how to assist one another in adaptable ways. They could divide responsibilities, coordinate respective resources to fill gaps in one another's strategies, and work together to achieve common goals bilaterally, with trusted partners, or through groupings as diverse as new multilaterals and existing multilateral organisations, including the Commonwealth.

Two threads unite these observations. Both governments have been early movers in recognising that the character of national security has changed drastically, to incorporate realities like geoeconomics,

cyber power and the nexus of domestic and international issues. The UK's 2021 Integrated Review combines all elements of statecraft, reflecting moves underway in policy. While Australia lacks a similar encompassing statement, it has taken a lead globally in hardening security policy to integrate matters like foreign investment, technology, critical infrastructure, Federal-State relations, universities, and foreign interference. Second, both governments are well aware they are playing a long game. Planning now for a reimagined Australia-UK security partnership will deliver over decades.

2022 vision: an early agenda

Against this backdrop, an extensive agenda is possible. We recommend:

Integrated policy coordination: In the spirit of the UK Integrated Review, Australia and the UK should establish bilateral multi-agency working groups to identify and encourage greater policy coordination across a broad security and resilience landscape. In addition to the AUKUS agenda of nuclear submarines and critical technologies, these could address Indo-Pacific strategy, pandemic response/public health, climate policy, supply chain security, protection of democratic institutions and countering foreign interference. These policy groups could leverage existing informal networks of expert and official contact across the two countries.

Defence capability and access: The two powers should expand access to each other's defence bases to enable a sustained UK military presence in the Indo-Pacific. Logistics and access arrangements between Australia and the UK should be formalised to at least the level both have negotiated with Japan. This could strengthen an Indo-Pacific web of access agreements, encompassing India, France, Japan, and the United States. Canberra and London should leverage each other's basing and access footprints, including that of the UK in the Indian Ocean, the Gulf and Brunei.

It would make sense for Australia to facilitate and for the UK to deliver regular visits by Astute-class nuclear-powered submarines to HMAS Stirling in Western Australia. The similarity of UK and Australian naval operating cultures is a compelling reason for Australian submariners to train through exchange service on British as well as American nuclear vessels.

Given the growing importance of outer space in economic and strategic terms, the two countries should also build on their 'Space Bridge' agreement signed in 2021, respective growing national industries, and policy prioritisation in this domain. In doing so, Canberra and London should look to boost joint development of outer space technology, share strategic infrastructure related to outer space for defence purposes, and work together with other partners to support a rules-based international order in outer space.

Cyber and critical technologies: This aspect of the AUKUS pact could deliver earlier outcomes than the nuclear submarine program, for instance trilateral initiatives to pool research and development of leading-edge capabilities. Canberra and London could develop one or more bilateral pilot activities in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, new submarine detection technologies or unmanned underwater vehicles, to galvanise trilateral cooperation. Australian officials should lead in identifying areas for complementary cooperation in such areas between AUKUS, Quad or other groupings, building on Australia's pioneering of the Quad technology agenda. The UK should be a first-rank partner for 'Quad Plus' projects on critical technology, such as shaping international standards to ensure data technologies do not advantage authoritarianism.

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Human capital: Australia and the UK have skilled and educated security and research workforces, but these are overstretched. An early priority should be a pooling of human capital on government projects to advance shared interests, through labour mobility, exchange arrangements, and streamlined procedures for mutual recognition of security clearances. Secondments between Australian and UK agencies should be the norm, to share expertise and keep the two governments sensitised to one another's worldviews. This will also help avoid the 'familiarity trap', where historic and cultural affinities mean both sides have sometimes presumed to understand the other's present realities better than they actually have.

Intelligence: There is scope to capitalise on the intelligence partnership to cooperate more fulsomely on strategic assessments and futures analysis. This could involve deepening and greater reciprocity of the current arrangement whereby an Australian official routinely liaises with the UK Joint Intelligence Committee.

A joint Futures Cell could be established between the Australian and UK intelligence communities, enabling them to continuously develop and share best-practice assessments of emerging risks and plausible contingencies. These could cover issues as diverse

as Chinese threats to attack Taiwan, the impacts of climate change, Antarctic and Arctic futures, and long-term impacts of today's and tomorrow's pandemics. Such work could commence at an unclassified level, for instance through a cooperative horizon-scanning activity involving government agencies, think tanks and universities. In the classified space, a joint study on the August 2021 Taliban takeover and calamitous international withdrawal from Afghanistan could provide insights to assist intelligence anticipation of future strategic shocks.

Australian and UK officials could lead in strengthening the Five Eyes, in two ways: the evolution of this trust-based grouping beyond intelligence sharing, towards coordination of strategic and geo-economic policy initiatives, especially on counter-coercion and cyber security; and the modalities of 'Five Eyes-plus' arrangements for intelligence-sharing or policy coordination, notably with Japan or European partners. AUKUS could be the core for this more layered approach to intelligence sharing.

Security education: Australia and the UK should coordinate capacity-building activities in third countries, with a focus on education and training to improve the resilience of partners in Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean and the Southwest Pacific. The building blocks exist: for instance, Australian-funded courses on cyber security and British-funded courses on countering disinformation. Given the continued challenge of terrorism, there would scope also for both countries to expand their CT and CVE training efforts, for instance in the Philippines. The UK could also be briefed on the Australian experience in security education domestically, notably the whole-of-government model of a National Security College, as an example of how to build a more integrated security workforce.

Indo-Pacific diplomacy: It will be essential to manage any perceptions of Australia-UK diplomacy being somehow at the expense of other alignments. The United States is the vital ally for both, Japan an important security partner, and many Indo-Pacific players need to be engaged on their own terms. It would be counter-productive if either country were to recast all its Indo-Pacific diplomacy through a prism of Anglo-Australian cooperation. This would be distorted by China as an 'external' imposition on Asia, and misread by European partners of the UK and Australia as a needlessly 'exclusive' approach. Instead, it makes sense to pursue a selective focus on those countries and issues where a Canberra-London alignment will be received for what it is: an effort to help regional partners build their own capacity to protect sovereignty.

To that end, there would be merit in joint engagement with specific countries, starting with India, Malaysia, the Philippines and Brunei. With India, Australia and the UK have opportunity and obligation to ensure New Delhi recognises AUKUS as a net benefit for Indian interests: AUKUS will strengthen Australia as a partner for India, and complements the Quad. An Australia-UK-India trilateral dialogue could be established to identify such convergences of interest. Malaysia is a swing state in China's efforts to dominate the Indo-Pacific, yet also subject to Chinese maritime pressure as a South China Sea claimant, and an existing partner for Australia and the UK under the Five Power Defence Arrangements involving also Singapore and New Zealand. It would benefit from coordinated efforts to strengthen its cyber defences and maritime surveillance. The Philippines would likewise gain from concerted UK-Australia assistance in cyber resilience, counter-disinformation and counter-terrorism. Brunei could be a locus for coordinated Australia-UK partnership, as both powers have strong existing ties, including the stationing of a UK light infantry battalion.

A delicate issue will be coordination or deconfliction with European diplomacy, given French concerns over how AUKUS displaced its submarine contract with Australia. In prosecuting their Indo-Pacific diplomacy, Canberra and London can highlight the convergences of their visions with EU and ASEAN policy outlooks, on commonalities such as support for principles of sovereignty, international law, ASEAN-centric diplomacy and non-coercion, without shying away from the reality that Chinese actions will force hard choices on regional countries. In many of their initiatives – including the critical technologies aspect of AUKUS – Australia and the UK should proactively seek ways to engage France and other European powers as partners.

As the UK expands its Indo-Pacific diplomacy, it will become well-placed to advise NATO on regional security dynamics and opportunities to engage in light of NATO's next Strategic Concept due in June 2022. NATO has increasingly recognised the multifaceted challenge that China presents to its members' national and collective security, as well as the potential for destabilisation in the Indo-Pacific. Given Australia's status as a NATO global partner – one of just four in the Indo-Pacific – and the UK's consistency in meeting NATO's 2% defence expenditure target as a percentage of national GDP, the two countries would be well-placed to advance dialogue and thinking within NATO on challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

At the same time, Australia should consider possible UK membership of Indo-Pacific institutions, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit or Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), on the basis of interests and contributions as a global stakeholder, rather than narrow geographic definitions.

This report builds on ideas raised in the 2021 Indo-Pacific 1.5 Track Virtual Strategic Dialogue between Australia and the UK, convened by the ANU National Security College (NSC) and the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), as well as incorporating the authors' insights. The NSC and RUSI acknowledge the support of the Australian Government (through DFAT and the Australian High Commission in London) in funding assistance for the dialogue and this publication. The conclusions are the authors' own, and should be taken neither as representing the views of the Australian or UK governments nor a consensus of the many expert and official participants in the dialogue.

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