

# MARITIME STRATEGIC EVALUATION FOR ISRAEL 2022/23

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## Strategic Weapons Supplies in the Context of Special Relations: AUKUS as a Case Study

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### Introduction

On September 15, 2021, the leaders of three nations – the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia – announced the formation of a trilateral security partnership named AUKUS.<sup>1</sup> The first and primary initiative of this new partnership is drawing up a plan within 18 months for the future delivery of eight nuclear-powered submarines to the Australian navy fleet. The emphasis is on providing nuclear propulsion technology rather than nuclear weapons, and the submarines will be equipped with conventional arms only. This new partnership also includes cooperation in other fields, such as cyberspace, artificial intelligence, quantum technology, and underwater capabilities. This is a complex and unique project involving military, scientific, and industrial cooperation.<sup>2</sup> A geostrategic analysis of this development indicates a US attempt to rebalance power relations in the Indo-Pacific region in light of China's unprecedented military buildup and its aggressive moves in the South China Sea and against Taiwan.<sup>3</sup>

This article focuses on the importance and strategic contribution of nuclear-powered submarines for Australia and examines why the United States (with UK help) decided to supply such a significant capability to its Australian ally rather than to Japan or to India, the other partners in the QUAD,<sup>4</sup> or to other strategic allies in the region, such as South Korea. The explanation I offer in this article is that the three nations have a special relationship based on their being part of the Anglosphere and on their shared language, culture, and history. I contend that this special relationship is the reason for the decision to supply this unique strategic weapon to Australia rather than to other allies in the region. This premise can be proven by comparing this decision to a historical case

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<sup>1</sup> The name is an acronym of Australia, United Kingdom, and United States.

<sup>2</sup> *The White House*, "[Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS](#)". September 15, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the topic, see Benni Ben Ari's article "Strategies in the Indo-Pacific Region", in Shaul Chorev and Ziv Rubinovitz (eds.), *Maritime Strategic Evaluation for Israel 2021/22* (Haifa: Maritime Policy & Strategy Research Center, University of Haifa, 2022), pp. 103–121.

<sup>4</sup> The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is a forum of states that deals with strategic issues. Its members are Japan, Australia, India, and the United States. The forum was established in 2007. It fell apart the following year, but was reinstated in 2017. The dialogue extends to joint military exercises called Malabar, which are seen as a counter to China's buildup. "[The Quad Conducts Malabar Naval Exercise](#)". 2021. (September 18, 2022).

with similar characteristics. In the 1960s, during the Cold War with the USSR, the United States made a similar move when it supplied the Royal Navy with Polaris missiles, ballistic missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead fired from submerged submarines. The technology, considered strategic and unique then and today, was provided only to the British, with which the United States have a special relationship, to the exclusion of other NATO allies, such as France.

## The French Connection

Today, the Australian navy operates six Collins-class submarines that run on conventional engines (diesel and electricity). Built in Australia according to designs of the Swedish company Kockums, they became operational in 2004.<sup>5</sup> As an island nation, Australia recognizes the importance of the underwater domain and its submarine fleet, and therefore engaged in many discussions about the future upgrade of its submarines, examining German, Japanese, and French proposals.

In 2016, Australia signed an agreement with the French Naval Group (formerly known as DCNS), which is largely a government-owned corporation. The deal included the construction of 12 advanced, conventionally powered Shortfin Barracuda submarines at a total cost of \$37 billion.<sup>6</sup> The French-Australian submarine project was launched soon thereafter, but suffered many schedule delays and cost overruns. Furthermore, the number of Australians working on the project never reached the level that Canberra had anticipated. As a result, the expected return compared to the high investment in the project came under harsh criticism.<sup>7</sup>

The day after the AUKUS partnership announcement was made, Australia cancelled its contract with the French company, at a cost to the Australian taxpayer of \$2.4 billion (including a \$585 million penalty) for a deal that, since its inception, had not provided any real gain.<sup>8</sup> The French responded sharply to the cancellation, recalling their ambassadors

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the project, see: *Naval Technology*, "[SSK Collins Class \(Type 471\) Submarine](#)", May 3, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, this model, with its conventional operation, is based on the Barracuda model, a nuclear-powered submarine being brought into operational service in the French fleet. At first glance, technologically speaking, France could have offered Australia nuclear-powered submarines just as did the Anglo-Saxon partners. Similarly, France is helping Brazil build nuclear-powered submarines as part of the strategic partnership between the two nations. "[Brazil Might Get Nuclear-Powered Submarines Even before Australia](#)", *The Economist*. September 30, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> *POLITICO*, "[Why Australia Wanted out of Its French Submarine Deal](#)", September 16, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> *BBC News*, "[Aukus: Australia to Pay €555m Settlement to French Firm](#)", June 11, 2022, sec. Australia.

from Washington and Canberra (the French ambassador to the United States was returned after the United States issued a statement conceding that the move should have been coordinated with the French). The French viewed the cancellation of the deal as an Australian breach of faith regarding cooperation with them. As an EU leader, France considers itself dominant in the Indo-Pacific region, given its important interests there (colonies and overseas territories), such as New Caledonia and French Polynesia, home to about two million French citizens. Those archipelago regions define a large EEZ (exclusive economic zone), which is why France maintains a military presence of some 7,000 soldiers there.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the economic loss from the cancellation, France, considered a global weapons provider, including in the underwater sector, also suffered damage to its prestige.<sup>10</sup> However, above all, France views itself as a key Western democratic partner in all moves related to China. US President Joe Biden referred to France in his statement, trying to downplay the meaning of the AUKUS partnership by declaring France an important partner in confronting developing threats in the Indo-Pacific theater.<sup>11</sup>

The Collins-class submarines in current use are expected to continue to serve the Australian navy until 2030 or so, whereas the new AUKUS submarines are expected to become operational in the 2040s. As a result, there is a decade-long gap for which Australia is busy discussing possible solutions, such as the purchase of conventionally powered submarines to be used as an "intermediate" generation until the arrival of the nuclear-powered ones.<sup>12</sup> Senior officials in the Australian security establishments warn of a situation in which Australia might be exposed and lacking a solution in its underwater domain. The government promised to publish a plan at the beginning of 2023 that would define the model to be built, the time it would take to build the submarines, and whether an additional generation of submarine models would be needed.<sup>13</sup> In addition, Australia

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<sup>9</sup> France has the second-largest EEZ in the world, consisting of some 11.035 million square kilometers. "[Drops in the Ocean: France's Marine Territories](#)", *The Economist*, January 13, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> In 2005, France transferred the technology for independent manufacturing of Kalvari-class submarines, based on the French Scorpène-class submarines, to India. These are conventionally powered with a displacement of 1,550 tons. India intends to build six such submarines by 2024, part of its arms race with its neighbor and adversary Pakistan, which bought eight Yuan Type 039A-class submarines from China. Gabriel Honrada, "[France, China Fueling India, Pakistan Sub Race](#)", *Asia Times*, February 4, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> *The White House*, "[Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS](#)", September 15, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> South Korea offered Australia conventionally powered submarines with AIP capability that increases their operational range. These can be provided within seven years of an order being placed. Colin Clark, "[South Koreans Offer Aussies New Subs in 7 Years to Close Collins Gap](#)", *Breaking Defense (blog)*, July 25, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> *ABC News*, "[AUKUS Nuclear Submarine Plan to Be Revealed by March 2023](#)", June 28, 2022.

can lease submarines from its partners in the interim while using the time until the new submarines are delivered to train teams for the future operation of these submarines. The United States has authorized a comprehensive plan to train Australian crews in the United States in commanding, operating, and maintaining nuclear-powered submarines. The purpose is to create a pool of officers and sailors who will eventually serve on the advanced submarines.<sup>14</sup>

## A Strategic Leap

The United States is aware of China's efforts to construct a new world order centered around itself. This involves China building a network of satellite states and subordinate nations, mainly by using economic leverage.<sup>15</sup> Past efforts to reduce this influence, in part by establishing the QUAD partnership, have yielded few results. It seems, then, that the AUKUS agreement is a dramatic step aimed at thwarting a Chinese attempt at attaining maritime hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>16</sup>

As noted, according to the joint declaration, there are 18 months to define the details of the plan. Still unsettled are questions such as the submarine model, its operational capabilities, the construction site, and the operational date. But a fleet of eight Australian nuclear-powered Virginia-class submarines (United States), Astute-class submarines (United Kingdom), or a new class altogether will provide the Australians with the ability to project naval power in the Indo-Pacific domain far beyond the shores of the Australian continent. The Americans and the British intend to provide the Australians with sensitive, classified technology, currently in the hands of only a handful of nations across the globe. According to the data in the "Military Balance 2021" report, the list of countries with nuclear-powered submarines includes the leading military superpowers: the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China.<sup>17</sup> India is another country with such capability. Having leased an Akula-class nuclear-powered submarine from Russia for a 10-

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<sup>14</sup> Megan Eckstein, "[New Bill Would Establish AUKUS Submarine Training Program](#)", *Defense News*, June 16, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> This is the claim of Bill Hayton, author of *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*. To back the claim, he cites the 2016 incident when the International Court of Justice in The Hague ruled in favor of the Philippines in its maritime border dispute with China in the South China Sea. The Philippine president ignored the ruling, choosing instead to accept significant Chinese financial investment in his country. "[AUKUS Reshapes the Strategic Landscape of the Indo-Pacific](#)", *The Economist*, September 25, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "[The AUKUS Dominoes Are Just Starting to Fall](#)", *Foreign Policy* (blog), September 18, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> [The 2021 Military Balance Chart: Submarines and Sub-Surface Warfare](#), *The Military Balance*, 121, no. 1 (2021).

year period, India is now in the midst of developing and constructing its own Arihant-class nuclear-powered submarines.<sup>18</sup> Australia would thus become the seventh country in the world to join the exclusive club of states with nuclear-powered submarines (Table 1).

Table 1: Nations with SSNs

NATION	SSN <sup>19</sup>	SSBN <sup>20</sup>	TOTAL
United States	54	14	68
Russia	18	11	29
China	6	6	12
United Kingdom	7	4	11
France	4	4	8
India <sup>21</sup>	-	1	1
Australia (AUKUS) – planned	8	-	8

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies

Technology for nuclear-powered submarines will upgrade Australia's naval capabilities in several ways. The submarine in question weighs twice as much as the submarines Australia currently operates or the ones they intended to buy from the French. While SSNs (the hull classification for fast, nuclear-powered attack submarines) are not the most suitable choice for Australia's relatively shallow littoral waters and the regions north of Australia and southeast Asia, they do offer many advantages compared to SSKs (conventionally powered submarines): higher speeds, longer operational duration, and greater operational ranges. According to calculations of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, a Washington D.C. think tank, an SSK leaving the home naval base of the Australian submarine fleet located near Perth, HMAS Stirling, can reach the South China Sea and remain there for about two weeks before being forced to return to base for refueling and maintenance. In contrast, an SSN is not constrained by fuel limitations and could therefore stay in the target region for as long as it had sufficient supplies for its crew.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, while in the target region, the submarine carries out a series of missions, such as intelligence gathering, sending special forces teams on clandestine operations, and, of course, threatening the adversary's ships and submarines.

<sup>18</sup> Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "[India Launches 3rd Arihant Submarine](#)", *ORF*, January 7, 2022. Additionally, with regard to India, some view the Soviet/Russian-Indian relations as special relations based on anti-colonial/anti-imperial history and values.

<sup>19</sup> SSN is the designation for a nuclear-powered attack submarine.

<sup>20</sup> SSBN is the designation for a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine.

<sup>21</sup> India has two other submarines, which are not currently operational and therefore undergoing processes of testing and sea trials (Rajagopalan, 2022).

<sup>22</sup> An SSN can remain at sea for 81 consecutive days while an SSK can do so for only 23.

Regarding secrecy, submarines powered by diesel and electricity (i.e., electricity stored in batteries) must surface periodically to enable the diesel engines, which require oxygen to run, to recharge their batteries. SSNs, of course, do not need to surface and therefore can avoid detection with greater ease. However, SSNs do make noise due to the operation of cooling mechanisms for the nuclear reactor, while the diesel-electrical submarines are quieter. However, SSNs can camouflage their noise between different layers of water temperature and avoid detection thanks to their speed and range.<sup>23</sup>

The change in the method of powering Australia's submarines is a strategic as well as a technological change. As noted, SSNs will allow the Australian navy to stay for longer periods in regions of strategic importance, such as the Strait of Malacca. Moreover, these submarines will improve the Australian navy's offensive capabilities by enabling them to launch long-range cruise missiles from east of the Philippines, for example, and strike at the Chinese mainland. But the most prominent advantage is cooperation with US and UK submarine fleets of this type. The Australian navy can place its new submarines at its naval base in Stirling at the western edge of the continent but also in the naval bases in Darwin on the northern shore and in Brisbane on the eastern shore. In addition, these ports can serve the US and UK navies as sites for preliminary formation and embarkation. Indeed, the day after the AUKUS announcement, the United States declared a significant increase in its military presence in Australia.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, there are a number of strategic missions in which Australian submarines can contribute to the strategic array the United States is consolidating to counter China. One is participating in protecting joint task forces that include aircraft carriers and other vessels cruising the region, whose objective in wartime is to deploy most of their military force against China. Another, and perhaps more significant mission is participating in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) against China's nuclear-powered submarines armed with nuclear ballistic missiles, the mainstay of China's nuclear deterrent. China's set of land-based nuclear missiles is not only subject to a first-strike threat from the United States, but it is also not immune to the missile defense systems of the United States and its regional allies. For the most part, China's deterrence is based on the second-strike capabilities of its SSBNs hiding in the deepest parts of the South China Sea or the western part of the Pacific Ocean. The AUKUS project has the potential to seriously threaten China's deterrence.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> "[AUKUS Reshapes the Strategic Landscape of the Indo-Pacific](#)", *The Economist*, September 25, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Tuvia Gering, "[Why China Is Genuinely Worried about AUKUS](#)", *SupChina*, November 29, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Romuld Gem, "[Troubled Waters: Nuclear Submarines](#)", *ICAN Australia (blog)*, July 6, 2022.

## Why Only Australia?

Having examined the strategic importance of the AUKUS alliances submarine project, an important question arises: Why provide these means only to Australia and not to other regional allies? This question becomes even more acute when considering the other regional partners efforts to strengthen and improve their military capabilities in the underwater domain. South Korea, for example, requested the technology from the United States and was rebuffed, partly because the United States does not want to supply nuclear materials to non-nuclear nations, and partly because, as a signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the United States has limits on its actions in this sphere.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, South Korea managed to develop its own ballistic missile to be launched from submarines (SLBM), thus becoming the seventh country in the world with this capability and the only one of the non-nuclear nations to have undertaken such a step.<sup>27</sup> India, as noted above, is developing its own SSBN, based on Soviet models, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that India would be happy to receive help from France or from the AUKUS partners in this field.<sup>28</sup> Japan, too, is expanding its military budget and building up its naval capabilities. After the establishment of AUKUS, there was talk about the possibility of expanding the alliance to include other nations, such as Japan. At first glance, this would seem to offer many benefits for the geostrategic situation of the United States and its allies in the region. However, the rumor was denied.<sup>29</sup> If so, why only Australia and no one else? I propose an explanation based on the allies preference for nations with which they have "special relationships" as opposed to others. This preference is reflected in the exclusive supply of weapons that are strategic and unique to such partners and not to others.

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<sup>26</sup> This NPT policy-in-principle on the part of the United States amplifies the understanding that the AUKUS alliance is truly extraordinary. The United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia declared that they were committed to meeting all the requirements of the International Atomic Energy Agency, but China claimed that the move had created a dangerous precedent that would lead to NPT violations. Stephen Dziedzic, "[China Launches Furious Attack on UN Nuclear Watchdog for 'lopsided AUKUS Report'](#)", *ABC News*, September, 2022. For more about South Koreas SSN ambitions and the connection to the United States, see: Choe Sang-Hun, "[South Korea Has Long Wanted Nuclear Subs. A New Reactor Could Open a Door](#)", *The New York Times*, December 13, 2021, sec. World.

<sup>27</sup> Kelsey Davenport, "[South Korea Tests Submarine-Launched Missile](#)", *Arms Control Association*, October 2021.

<sup>28</sup> "[AUKUS Reshapes the Strategic Landscape of the Indo-Pacific](#)", *The Economist*, September 25, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> "[Washington and Tokyo Deny Japan Invited to Join AUKUS Security Pact](#)", *The Japan Times*, April 14, 2022.



Special relationships represent a high level of bilateral relations, and include political, economic, and cultural connections between two states.<sup>30</sup> They involve unique features that distinguish the relationship between one pair of states from those they have with other states. Accordingly, each of the two states may maintain special relationships with a limited number of other states; otherwise, the quality of being "special" loses any meaning. Such relationships are acknowledged by the pair itself and by other states, especially those with whom there are also special relationships. These are marked by closeness, collaboration, mutual trust, and intimacy between the two states, not only at the governmental level but also in society at large. Although special relationships represent the exception rather than the rule in international relations, researchers have mapped more than 50 different special bilateral relationships, including the relationship Israel has with the United States and the one Germany has with Israel.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to being an important ally of the West in the Indo-Pacific region, the uniqueness of Australia lies in its being a part of the Anglosphere – the English-speaking nations – having shared history of being connected to the British Empire of the past centuries. Anglo-Saxon culture and values distinguish Australia from other allies in the region, and have served as the basis for the special relations between it and the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>32</sup> Australia is unique in that geographically, it lies in the Pacific/Southeast Asian domain, but its history and cultural orientation are for the most

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<sup>30</sup> The "special relationship" concept was first introduced to global consciousness by Sir Winston Churchill in an address commonly known as his "Iron Curtain speech", which he gave on a visit to the United States as leader of the UK opposition in 1946.

<sup>31</sup> See: Sebastian Harnisch, 2017, "[Special Relationships in Foreign Policy](#)", In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Oxford University Press. Similarly, the research literature offers several other sources on the creation of special relationships between nations, e.g., those based on a historic event or on a formative national experience, such as a national trauma. For instance, the special relationships between Germany, on the one hand, and several nations that were most obviously traumatized by Nazi aggression during World War II, on the other hand. At the heart of such a relationship stands Germany's reconciliation efforts with those nations, such as France and Poland, which were occupied by the Nazi regime, and the State of Israel, representing the Jewish people, one-third of whom was eradicated in the Holocaust. See: Lily Gardner Feldman, 2012, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

<sup>32</sup> The Anglosphere is a commonly used term referring to the relationships among the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, i.e., nations with special relationships between one another and with the United States (as the world's economic and military superpower) on the basis of a shared historical, cultural, and linguistic background. These relationships are manifested in various alliances, such as the Five Eyes and ANZUS. For more, see: J. Dumbrell and A. Schäfer (eds.), 2009, [Americas' Special Relationships: Foreign and Domestic Aspects of the Politics of Alliance](#), Routledge.

part European. There is a kind of internal tension between these two components in the formation of the character of the Australian state. This tension affects the country's policy and the strategic direction the country takes within the international system. Following World War II, Australia shifted the core of its strategic partnership from the United Kingdom to the United States, and remained constant in its ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty) alliance with the United States (which originally included New Zealand too<sup>33</sup>) throughout the Cold War and the global war on terrorism.<sup>34</sup> In those years, there was domestic criticism about the necessity of the close alliance with the United States and questions about the degree to which it served Australia's national interests. Some see the expansion of the partnership with the United States and United Kingdom as a regression from the process of formulating an independent local identity and a return to the days of the establishment of the Australian state as a part of the British Empire.<sup>35</sup>

In fact, the joint declaration by the nations' leaders on the establishment of the three-country AUKUS partnership included explicit reference to their deep shared heritage. US President Joe Biden mentioned the 100 years of cooperation among the three nations during which US, British, and Australian soldiers fought side by side, from the trench warfare of World War I, through the fight for control over the islands in the Pacific Ocean during World War II, the Korean War, to the warfare in Afghanistan and the Iraqi desert. Then-UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson referred to the closeness and the natural connection among the countries; similarly, then-Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison spoke of the shared beliefs and friendship created among them over time. The joint statements of the countries' leaders reveal one of the prominent indicators of their special relationships: their resilience in the face of crises and stability over time, including the conduct of these nations when crises do arise in their relationships.

A special relationship represents a relatively fixed situation in the global political environment, rather than a temporary state created under special conditions that passes once the sides' interests or capabilities change. One can identify other features of a special relationship manifested in the interactions among the three AUKUS partners: official public expressions of one country towards the other about their special relationship; the establishment of official relations between governmental agencies at all levels (military

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<sup>33</sup> New Zealand has not been a member of ANZUS since 1985 because of its refusal to allow nuclear-powered US vessels or vessels carrying nuclear weapons to anchor in its ports.

<sup>34</sup> M. Beeson (2009). Australia, the United States and the Unassailable Alliance. In J. Dumbrell and A. R. Schafer (eds.), *Americas' Special Relationships: Foreign and Domestic Aspects of the Politics of Alliance*, Routledge, pp. 76–92.

<sup>35</sup> Romuld Gem, "[Troubled Waters: Nuclear Submarines](#)", *ICAN Australia* (blog), July 6, 2022.

echelons and senior officialdom); expressions of support in international institutions and organizations; cooperation of institutions and organizations in social, cultural, and academic settings; a relatively high volume of economic and military commerce between them; one side in the special relationship has unique needs that only the special relationship partner can provide; a profound connection between the people and the societies beyond the political connections between the regimes and leaderships; and conduct between the leaders characterized by transparency, a lack of formality, mutuality, exclusivity, confidentiality, trust, and more. One must take into account that, while special relationships can be assessed by these criteria, beyond the value they provide in such absolute terms, they also involve a relative value measured by comparisons with relationships with other nations.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, the expression of Australia's preference in this move did not go unnoticed by other regional allies that voiced criticism that the move expressed Anglo-Saxon separatism and ignored important allies in Europe and Asia. Some claimed that the new partnership reduced the impact of the QUADs power, and there were those who even called for providing this capability to South Korea, now in a process of strengthening its naval capacity against the common threat. However, others, such as Japan, Singapore, the Philippines, and New Zealand, openly supported the move, viewing it as an important step for preserving freedom of navigation and security in the region. At the same time, some, such as Malaysia, carefully expressed reservations, particularly about the danger of a regional conflagration.<sup>37</sup>

## History Repeats Itself

Can a special relationship be the reason for unique strategic weapons being supplied to one country rather than to others? Unique, classified technology is exclusive to powers that generally do not want to share it with other countries. Still, there are examples of one

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<sup>36</sup> For more on the characteristics of special relationships, see: Michal Ben-Josef Hirsch and Manjari Chatterjee Miller, "[Otherness and Resilience in Bilateral Relations: The Cases of Israel–Germany, India–Russia, and India–Israel](#)", *Journal of International Relations and Development* (April 2020); Alice Pannier, "[Bilateral Relations](#)", In *Global Diplomacy: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, edited by Thierry Balzacq, Frédéric Charillon, and Frédéric Ramel, Springer International Publishing, pp. 19–33; Kai Oppermann and Mischa Hansel, "[The Ontological Security of Special Relationships: The Case of Germany's Relations with Israel](#)", *European Journal of International Security*, 4, no. 1 (2019): 79–100; Kristin Haugevik, 2018, *Special Relationships in World Politics: Inter-State Friendship and Diplomacy after the Second World War*, London: Routledge; Alex Danchev, "[On Specialness](#)", *International Affairs*, 72, no. 4 (October 1996): 737–50.

<sup>37</sup> "[AUKUS Reshapes the Strategic Landscape of the Indo-Pacific](#)", *The Economist*, September 25, 2021.

country – usually a power with significant military capabilities – providing another country with this type of capability. Again, the question arises as to why this is so. The hypothesis I suggest is that when discussing strategic capabilities of the highest level, realist theory do not provide a sufficient explanation. This makes it necessary to turn to theories based on ideational and identity-based explanations. That is, the choice of a specific country is not entirely based on strategic considerations of a balance of power and a balance of threat. There is another distinct component that could lead to the preference for one country over another – the special relationship. I make this claim by comparing the current case with a historical case from the 1960s, at the height of the Cold War, when the United States provided ballistic missiles launched from the Polaris class submarine to the United Kingdom, as well as helping it build nuclear propulsion for submarines.<sup>38</sup>

The development of the Polaris missile was one of the most challenging projects the United States had ever undertaken. They were the first missiles in the world to be launched from submerged submarines. The Polaris missile played an important role in nuclear deterrence because it changed the rules of the game. Until the Polaris, the fear was that one superpower would surprise the other by launching a first strike of nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) or by attacking with strategic bombers dropping nuclear bombs on the other sides control centers, missile bases, and airports, creating an inherently unstable strategic situation. When both sides developed submarines equipped with nuclear ballistic missiles, which are very difficult to locate and identify, the superpowers suddenly had second strike capabilities. Should one side surprise the other, it cannot manage to destroy most of its nuclear arsenal with a first strike, and the attacker would come under the threat of a second strike from some unknown location in the ocean, and would therefore think twice about the first strike being able to achieve its goal in practice. This was how mutual nuclear deterrence, based on the threat of mutual assured destruction (MAD), was achieved, and fundamentally changed the Cold War reality.

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<sup>38</sup> Other potential comparisons are the German-Israeli case whose special relationship is based on national trauma that affected the provision of German submarines of a unique class under unique acquisitions terms, while also promising not to provide the same submarine to Israel's adversaries without Israel's authorization. Kai Oppermann and Mischa Hansel, "[The Ontological Security of Special Relationships: The Case of Germany's Relations with Israel](#)", *European Journal of International Security*, 4, no. 1 (2019): 79–100. Another case is the US-Israeli one in which one sees a special relationship that is not based on strategic considerations alone, and which results in supply and joint development of unique strategic weapons systems, such as advanced aerial defenses based on the Arrow missile. Jeremy M. Sharp, 2020, "[U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel](#)", *Congressional Research Service*, no. RL33222 (November): 46.

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To understand the connection between the Polaris missile and special relationships, one must be familiar with the background the events at that time. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Cold War was at its peak. Long-range bombers armed with nuclear bombs were the only nuclear weapon the United Kingdom had to deter the USSR. Given the Soviet development of sophisticated aerial defense systems, which interfered with bombers ability to reach their targets, the United Kingdom sought to upgrade its nuclear arsenal by acquiring the US ballistic Skybolt missiles, which could be launched from planes over great distances. The project suffered many delays and problems and was finally scrapped by the United States, a cancellation that led to a serious crisis in the relationship between the two nations. At the same time, the United States was developing another option for launching ballistic missiles, this time from submerged submarines (SLBMs) of the Polaris model. These missiles were considered the most complex and classified weapons system the United States was developing at that time. On December 21, 1962, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan met with US President John Kennedy in Nassau in the Bahamas to try to resolve the crisis between their countries. Macmillan spoke to Kennedy about the moral obligation the United States had to provide the United Kingdom, its closest and most loyal ally, with a suitable alternative to the scuttled Skybolt. The US side, too, realized it had a duty to compensate the British. Kennedy suggested that the Skybolt project would continue, now as a joint project in which each country would be a full partner in its development. Although it was clear to the United States that Macmillan really wanted the Polaris, the Americans did not want to involve a foreign party, no matter how close, in its most complicated and clandestine project. Moreover, the Kennedy administration objected to the idea of providing Polaris missiles to an ally that might operate submarines equipped with these missiles independently of the United States. At that time, US policy supported the deployment of Polaris-armed submarines by multinational forces comprised of NATO members forming multinational submarine crews under US command in the context of NATO missions. The intention was to prevent any one NATO member from having this unique capability while at the same time expanding NATO's deterrence capacity in a controlled manner under US command. Macmillan, who had already stopped considering the Skybolt a reliable nuclear deterrent, insisted on the Polaris as the only possible alternative. After intensive efforts, he succeeded in convincing Kennedy.

Kennedys acquiescence struck many of his aides as a step too far, one he should not have taken. There are several possible explanations for his decision based on different levels of analysis of international relations. At the systemic level, it was necessary to strengthen the joint deterrence of western nations against the Soviet Union, and the British were the Americans closest allies. At the domestic politics/state level, the United States wanted to strengthen the Tory Party that governed the United Kingdom and thwart the rise of

the Labour Party. And, at the individual level, the relationship between the US president and the British prime minister was very close. However, beyond all of these explanations, it is clear that the relationship between two nations was unique and connected to their shared identity. President Kennedy realized that, at that time, a US refusal would result in an unprecedented crisis in the special relationship between the nations and therefore took an unusual step. It would have been impossible to reach a similar agreement with any other ally.<sup>39</sup>

Ultimately, what came to be called the Nassau Agreement ended with the sale of the Polaris missile to the United Kingdom (without the nuclear warheads, which the British were able to provide on their own), on condition that the missiles would be deployed under NATO command. The British were pleased because the agreement included an article that should a threat to supreme UK interests develop, the British would be able to deploy the missile independently. While the British were now somewhat dependent on US technology to operate their own submarine-based nuclear capability,<sup>40</sup> Macmillan ensured his nations independent nuclear deterrence in the face of external adversaries for years to come, strengthened the kingdoms status in the international arena as a global power, and safeguarded close political and military connections with the most powerful country in the world – the United States.<sup>41</sup>

As part of the agreement, the British provided the Americans with a forward naval base in Holy Loch, Scotland, for US Polaris submarines. In February 1968, the British had their first test launch of the Polaris A-3 class missile from the British Resolution-class submarine in the Atlantic Ocean. The missile was fired to a range of thousands of kilometers and hit its intended target, marking the entrance of the Polaris into service in the Royal Navy and the shift of responsibility for UK nuclear deterrence away from the Royal Air Force and onto the Royal Navy.<sup>42</sup> Later, in the 1990s, the United States provided the United Kingdom with

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<sup>39</sup> Richard E. Neustadt, 2018, *Report to JFK: The Skybolt Crisis in Perspective*, Cornell University Press.

<sup>40</sup> In the 1970s, the British tried to independently develop alternate dividing warheads for the Polaris missile in the Chevaline project, but they were very expensive relative to the operational benefit they could provide, and so this route was abandoned.

<sup>41</sup> Before the Polaris, the British doubted the US ability to provide a nuclear umbrella for them should the Soviets attack London, risking cities such as New York or Washington. N. J. Wheeler, "[British Nuclear Weapons and Anglo-American Relations, 1945–1954](#)", *International Affairs* 62, no. 1 (1985): 71–86.

<sup>42</sup> British strategy was continuous at sea deterrence (CASD), i.e., at any given moment, there would be at least one submarine (of four in existence) equipped with nuclear ballistic missiles in strategic readiness somewhere deep in the ocean. The United Kingdom is the only nuclear power that relies exclusively on launching ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads from submarines. The other nuclear nations have other capabilities, such as ICBMs launched from sites on land and nuclear

Trident missiles, the next generation of the Polaris.<sup>43</sup> The Polaris and Trident missiles, which are top-secret, expensive, and technologically complicated, were sold only to the United Kingdom. While the Kennedy administration had plans to establish a multinational force of NATO members that would collaborate to crew the submarines equipped with the Polaris missile, these plans never came to fruition, partly because of UK opposition. There was also a suggestion to provide France with Polaris missiles, but this also came to naught.<sup>44</sup> Only the British were given this capability. No NATO member and no major non-NATO ally (MNNA) received it, even though making the Polaris capabilities available to other NATO members would have made a significant contribution to the United States during the Cold War by strengthening its deterrence against the Soviet threat.

## Conclusion

The establishment of AUKUS is a milestone in the rivalry between the United States and China. Not long after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, US President Joe Biden continues the Pivot to Asia strategy, choosing the strategic approach that characterized President Barack Obama (under whom President Biden served as vice president): a joint multilateral regional approach to confront the Chinese threat to the Indo-Pacific region. After Brexit, the United Kingdom is working to position itself as a dominant player on the global map, adopting a foreign affairs and security policy of Global Britain in a Competitive Age, which includes preparing for a significant military confrontation. Despite its economic

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weapons aboard bombers, thus completing their nuclear triad. Strategically, the ability to launch nuclear weapons from submarines deep underwater is considered highly effective, because it is very difficult to locate submarines deep in the ocean, thus ensuring the survivability of that capability. "[The UKs Nuclear Deterrent: What You Need to Know](#)", GOV.UK, February 17, 2022.

<sup>43</sup> The US cruise missile Tomahawk BGM-109 also belongs to this category of strategic arms supplied to nations with which the United States has a special relationship.

<sup>44</sup> The French governments policy at that time, under the leadership of President Charles de Gaulle, was to develop European deterrence independently of the United States. Therefore, France viewed the UK move of building nuclear deterrence based and dependent on US technology as proof that the United Kingdom was not a European country and that its transatlantic connection was stronger than its affiliation with Europe. Consequently, de Gaulle vetoed the UKs entrance into the Common Market (as the EU was then known). Richard Davis, "[Why Did the General Do It? De Gaulle, Polaris and the French Veto of Britains Application to Join the Common Market](#)", *European History Quarterly*, 28, no. 3 (1998): 373–97. The US proposal to provide the Polaris missile to France and Frances rejection of it do not weaken the claim that special relationships lead to the supply of strategic weapons; on the contrary, they only strengthen it, as special relationships are mutual. The receiver of the strategic weapon develops dependence on the supplier and therefore both sides must view the relationship as deep and identity-based, beyond merely strategic considerations. While France is a close ally of the United State, it differs from the United Kingdom in this regard.

dependence on China, Australia is taking a step that makes it abundantly clear that it is in the US camp and is preparing militarily for the growing Chinese threat to the region. As expected, Chinas response has been to say this is a manifestation of a Cold War mentality and a step that only contributes to the development of a regional arms race.

The strategic significance of nuclear-powered submarines for the Australian navy is the ability to reach distant targets and remain there a long time in secret, while being armed with various weapons, including Tomahawk-type missiles capable of hitting Chinese targets with precision. The United States is already a partner in a regional alliance in Asia – the QUAD – with key nations involved, but AUKUS is a military partnership with more clearly defined objectives than simply strategic coordination among nations. AUKUS is unique because it is a military partnership among three nations with special relationships, the key axis of which is the supply of unique strategic weapons that are not being supplied to other allies. Despite its uniqueness, this sort of move occurred in the past under similar circumstances, and the common denominator is the special relationship between the strategic arms supplier and the recipient.

The comparison between AUKUS case and the Polaris case shows many recurring features. In both cases, there are: a clear threat by a revisionist power with a confrontational ideology (China and the Soviet Union, respectively); an example of international cooperation (trilateral now rather than bilateral then) in facing a regional threat; special relationships based on closeness of language, culture, and history; the technology is being provided to the country with which the supplier has a special relationship and not to other regional allies; the involvement of nuclear technologies of strategic importance (nuclear-powered submarines and ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads); and the receiving country providing a forward base of operations to the country supplying the unique technology. The AUKUS submarines emerged against a background of difficulties and problems with French submarines, while Polaris came into the world because of the Skybolt crisis, and so on. The pattern repeats itself and the level of threat in the rivalry between the leading superpowers increases. Each side will try to build itself up in different ways, including creating and strengthening alliances plus providing arms to those allies. In this context, the superpower that has a special relationship with another country will choose to supply only it with unique strategic weapons that will not be given to its other allies.

About six decades after the Polaris, we are witnessing a similar move, this time against a different power – China. On the brink of an inter-superpower rivalry or second Cold War, the United States and United Kingdom are undertaking a strategic move indicative of distinctions being made among different allies on the basis of a shared identity, culture, and values. Thus, beyond a realist analysis and considerations of creating alliances with potential partners of strategic value and strengthening them, we are witnessing



considerations aligned with constructivist understandings of identity and ideology when it comes to deciding on the supply of unique strategic weapons. Based on the historical example from the Cold War with the Soviet Union, we may presume that Australia will play a more important and integral role in the array of US alliances (just as the British stood out compared to the other European allies in the past). Such a scenario also reflects Australia's strategic location and especially its unique character in the region as a country with an Anglo-Saxon character surrounded by Oceanic and Asian peoples and cultures. Accordingly, we may expect an opportunity for Australia to upgrade its regional and global status; on the other hand, this will likely entail an economic cost in its dealings with China. The rise to power of the Labour Party in Australia, a party with more moderate positions regarding dealing with the Chinese threat than the previous ruling party, raises the question if the AUKUS initiative will be implemented and, if so, in what format. Possible changes in the US administration and the potential return of Trump to the Oval Office raise the same questions on the US side of the Pacific Ocean. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the Tories are still in power but are suffering from political instability and an economic crisis, which might lead to a change there as well. Despite all the above, special relationships between nations are characterized by relative stability and are generally able to withstand these types of changes. Additionally, strategic projects of this magnitude are never likely to be cancelled. But only time will tell.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> This is what happened in the relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom, a classic case of special relationships. Their relationship has had its ups and downs, but joint strategic projects between the two were carried out (as demonstrated by the Polaris and the next generation Trident project). As I noted, a possible explanation is that the special relationship is not reserved to the upper echelon alone; it exists at all government and bureaucratic ranks and leaves a deep imprint affecting the entire political spectrum in both nations.

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