

Has AUKUS Nuclear Submarine Deal Stalled?

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According to recent reports, an amendment proposed by AUKUS (Australia, UK and the US) countries to legitimize their nuclear submarine cooperation is being curbed by Chinese diplomatic efforts. The \$122.4 billion dollars deal reached in September 2021 had been announced as the core component of this new strategic partnership.

[AUKUS](#), the security pact between these three Anglo-Saxon countries to counter China, was announced in September 2021, and [has been controversial](#) from the very start. Together with the QUAD, it has certainly [increased tensions](#) in the Asia-Pacific region.

In this context, Australian authorities in Canberra plan to acquire at least eight nuclear submarines, thereby possibly making the Indo-Pacific state [the first one in the Southern Hemisphere](#) to possess such vessels, as well as the first country that is a party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to do so other than the five recognized weapon states, namely the US, Russia, China, UK, and France. According to the International Atomic Energy (IAE) Rafael Grossi, these submarines will be fuelled by "highly enriched uranium", so they could be weapons-grade or close to it. Beijing's Permanent Mission, in a [position paper](#) sent to the IAE last month, emphasized the fact that the "AUKUS partnership involves the illegal transfer of nuclear weapon materials, making it essentially an act of nuclear proliferation."

The AUKUS countries in turn argue that the NPT allows marine nuclear propulsion as long as the proper arrangements are made with the Agency. However, in this case, nuclear material will be transferred to rather than produced by Australia itself. China disagrees with the AUKUS' stance, arguing that the IAE is in fact overstepping its mandate. Beijing has called for an "inter-governmental" process to examine the issue at hand.

This is a complicated matter: when nuclear submarines are at sea, their fuel is not within the reach of the IAE's inspectors and there is no way to keep track of the nuclear material. The agency's director himself, Rafael Grossi, has told the BBC the AUKUS submarine deal would be "very tricky" for nuclear inspectors.

China's mission to the UN in Vienna has also bluntly described AUKUS' plans as nuclear proliferation under a naval nuclear propulsion "cover". Ambassador Wang Qun, Chinese Permanent Representative to the UN accused the AUKUS states of "double standard" in a September 19 [interview](#).

American-Chinese tensions are already too high over the issue of Taiwan and to add fuel to the fire, Beijing perceives the US-led AUKUS plans as the West pushing its sea frontiers against China by weaponizing its ally Australia with nuclear submarines. To make matters worse, under the current arrangements the fleet would be a US-controlled squadron. Given the ongoing American ["dual containment" policy](#), Beijing's concerns do make a lot of sense.

Chen Hong, president of the Chinese Association of Australian Studies and also a director of the Australian Studies Center at East China Normal University, has even warned that by playing a part in this, Canberra could be sacrificing its own national security for the sake of other countries' national interests.

In July, two Chinese think-thanks (China Arms Control and Disarmament Association and China Institute of Nuclear Industry Strategy) had already warned that the AUKUS submarine project could set a "dangerous precedent" and thus threaten non-proliferation in a lengthy report called "A Dangerous Conspiracy: The Nuclear Proliferation Risk of the Nuclear-powered Submarines Collaboration in the Context of AUKUS."

According to the document, if the US and the UK have their way, nuclear states will for the very first time be transferring weapons-grade nuclear material to a non-nuclear state (Australia). Such a precedent, it warns, "ferments potential risks and hazards in multiple aspects such as nuclear security, arms race in nuclear submarines and missile technology proliferation, with a profound negative impact on global strategic balance and stability." The report also controversially evokes the possibility that Canberra might actually be intent on acquiring nuclear weapons, given its historical pursuit of the technology since the 1950s.

Meanwhile, Rob Wittman and Donald Norcross, two members of the US House Armed Services Committee, in a [Wilson Center discussion](#) on southeast Asia and the Pacific, have urged Australians to work closely with the US to master nuclear technology.

Anthony Moretti, a Department of Communication and Organizational Leadership Professor at the Robert Morris University argues that there is a loophole in the NPT which would allow Canberra to acknowledge to the IEA that it has acquired nuclear materials and then simply refuse to allow any inspections validating its procedures. This would be the only way for Australia to go ahead with the AUKUS deal under the current framework, but the problem is the dangerous precedent it would set, as mentioned above. It is quite hard to imagine how Beijing could possibly allow such development.

In his recent book titled "Sub-Imperial Power: Australia in the International Arena", retired Australian army intelligence officer, Clinton Fernandes makes the convincing point that Canberra's defense strategy has been built around a "structural dependence" on the US, which leaves it unable to defend itself in any scenario other than "in the context of the US Alliance."

Australia has been called the ["coup capital"](#) of the so-called democratic world and the American influence on the country over the years has a lot to do with this. Washington has also controlled Canberra's foreign policy for decades, as exemplified by the infamous [Anglo-](#)

[American coup](#) that “dismissed” Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. Right now, the island-country has become yet another focal point of tensions between great powers.

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