

## **AUKUS and Australia's Nuclear-Powered Submarine: A Reinforced Strategic Culture**

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### **Abstract**

Australia's decision to enter the AUKUS has caused some controversies among regional powers, especially noting the heightened Indo-Pacific discourse lately. But AUKUS isn't a mere alliance against revisionist power, it has much deeper and greater significance on Australia's defence policies. This paper argues that AUKUS reflect the dilemmatic sub-strategic cultures within Australia's defence policy considerations against the changing strategic environment in Indo-Pacific, the self-reliance and strategic dependence. Strategically, AUKUS presented Australia the opportunity to participate and shaping the Indo-Pacific under US-led initiative and act as technology catalysator on defence sector. Operationally, the nuclear-powered procurement under AUKUS will significantly boost Australia's submarine fleet capability in sea denial and sea control mission as a part of larger coalition. Using strategic culture lens and studying primary and secondary documents in a qualitative work, the analysis of this paper concludes that AUKUS reflected the return and reinforced pattern of strategic dependence within Australia's defence policy in the age of Indo-Pacific.

**Keywords:** AUKUS, Australia, strategic culture, submarine

*Keputusan Australia untuk ikut dalam Kerjasama pertahanan AUKUS telah menimbulkan kontroversi di antara negara-negara di Kawasan, mengingat naiknya tensi diskursus Indo-Pasifik belakangan ini. Namun, AUKUS bukanlah sekadar aliansi pertahanan untuk menghadapi kekuatan revisionis, AUKUS memiliki signifikansi yang lebih dalam dan besar bagi kebijakan pertahanan Australia. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa AUKUS merefleksikan dilema budaya stratejik dalam kebijakan pertahanan Australia dihadapkan pada perubahan lingkungan strategis di Indo-Pasifik. Secara strategis, AUKUS membuka peluang bagi Australia untuk terlibat dalam membentuk diskursus Indo-Pasifik serta menjadi wadah untuk mempercepat transfer teknologi di sektor pertahanan. Secara operasional, pengadaan kapal selam bertenaga nuklir di AUKUS akan meningkatkan kemampuan armada bawah air Australia pada misi sea denial dan sea control dalam operasi gabungan. Dengan menggunakan kaca-mata budaya stratejik, analisis studi kualitatif dari sumber literatur primer dan sekunder ini menyimpulkan bahwa AUKUS memantapkan kembalinya dan menguatnya strategic dependence pada kebijakan pertahanan Australia di era Indo-Pasifik.*

**Kata Kunci:** AUKUS, Australia, budaya stratejik, kapal selam



## Introduction

China has returned, stronger than ever with its infrastructure and economic power that prosper not only Asia but many states around the globe, including Australia as a major trading partner. Through great power politics, China displayed its determination, even risking war to mark its presence in the region, slowly pushing the US to limit its decision between risking a confrontation or backing off upon China's move (White 2017). Australia's concern for the region's stability, which now moved towards the Indo-Pacific framework, increased; it includes the hope for US commitment, intensifying partnerships with other middle powers in the region, as well as heavy reliance on international rules-based order and cooperation (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Australia 2017). And suddenly, Australia entered AUKUS. Canberra announced its newest security partnership with Washington and London through the signing of AUKUS on September 15th 2021 in a surprising move. It is aimed to *"strengthen the ability of each to support our security and defence interests, building on our longstanding and ongoing bilateral ties"* (Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS 2021). The decision prompted various response from the neighboring states, allies and of course China. It has caused uneasiness among neighbors such as Indonesia which *"cautiously monitor and deeply concerned over the continuing arms race and power projection in the region"* and Malaysia that worried about the view from Chinese leadership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia 2021; Sambhi 2021).

Yet it also received several warm welcomes from Japan, Singapore, Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam that increasingly involved in the struggle for Indo-Pacific (Department of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of The Philippines 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Singapore 2021; Sambhi 2021). China issued a strong condemnation, as expected, saying the Cold War styled approach will intensify arms race and destabilization of the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021). Although not officially admitted, AUKUS is seen as the latest effort to counter Beijing's rise and supporting the Free and Open Indo-Pacific architecture. The agreement itself entails cooperation in intelligence sharing especially relating to cyber-network, the acquisition of *Tomahawk* cruise missile and eight nuclear-powered submarines (SSN) for Australia (Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS 2021). The latter sparked tension with Paris as the ongoing Attack class diesel electric-powered submarine (SSK) contract (to replace the ageing *Collins* class diesel submarine) was unilaterally cancelled. This sudden announcement leads us to question the reason behind Australia's decision

to sign AUKUS in an increasingly complex region. Noting the limited space, this paper aimed to analyze why and how AUKUS affects Australia's position, strategically in the geopolitical landscape, and operationally in its submarine capability through the lens of strategic culture.

### **Literature Review**

Traditionally, AUKUS is the epitome of realist's balancing act to maintain the balance of power. Within an anarchical society, it is natural for a state to balance itself externally or internally against a rising power (Waltz 1979). For Walt, it is not just to oppose other state from gaining too much power, but also whether the power is owned by threat, which in this case is China, hence balance of threat (Walt 1985). But back to external balancing, it could be done through the use of arms of others (alliance) in which AUKUS presents as the ideal example. The decision to ally is attributed to the "capability aggregation" by combining several powers or using the capabilities of allies instead relying in our own, but also presented the question of commitment (Waltz 1979). It also elevates the burden of defence spending thus solving the "bread and butter debate" as well as presenting greater power against advancing threat. It could also be seen as part of defence diplomacy mechanism which gained popularity in the region as Australia deepened its ties with its neighboring states and outside powers as well (Carr 2015; Baldino 2016). This school saw the need to increase confidence building measures on regional defence as well as increasing interoperability to manage potential crisis (Emmers 2012; Lockyer 2015).

Yet this paper argues there's more than just balancing act and diplomacy when it comes to the relationship between Canberra, London, and Washington, which has deeper historical ties in terms of geopolitical interests. If only considering the balancing and defence diplomacy, Australia wouldn't easily revoke its already signed proposal with France, especially in terms of the submarine procurement. France, too, could also provide what Australia needed if it's specifically aim for nuclear-powered submarines. Thus, in this case, will lead to our alternative explanations of AUKUS through the lens of strategic culture, where Australia's strategic dilemma lies in. Strategic culture has played an ever-important role in shaping Australia's defence outlook and policies, and still hotly debated since the end of the Cold War. There are at least two schools in which scholars argue.

The first group saw Australia's strategic culture as a *strategic dependence* which rely heavily upon the help of the big and powerful friends, the United Kingdom and United States. This strategic culture was born out of the deep anxiety that came from historical experience and geographical

position that forced Australia to be dependent to other great powers (Bisley 2016). The *strategic dependence* is manifested through many defence policies that include defence pacts and cooperation, and widely received bipartisan support in domestic politics (MacGraw 2011). *Forward defence* doctrine, the increasing deployment of Australian Defence Force (ADF) overseas and joint operations/exercises in the regions also supported this school's argument. Against the changing Indo-Pacific backdrop, strategic dependence could be seen as a relevant approach to reflect Australia's preference to include US presence in maintaining stability.

The second group of scholars saw the newer emerging strategic culture of Australia, the *self-reliance*, and its potential to face current challenges. This group argued that *strategic dependence* has been purposely replaced by the willingness to be more pragmatic and self-reliant in navigating the Asia-Pacific in the 1980s by freely engaging the region without outside intervention (Ball 2001). This school also saw the greater role Australia could play as an independent middle power in the region, especially by benefitting from the rise of China in early 2000s while maintaining the region's stability. The continental defence of Australia became the outlook in defence policy by ensuring the capability of the ADF to defend Australia without foreign help. *Self-reliance* also includes the renewed regional defence *plus* concept which lead Australia to conduct limited pre-emptive expeditionary operations in the Global War on Terror campaign (Lantis 2011; Doeser and Eidenfalk 2019).

In the age of Indo-Pacific, *self-reliance* could mean greater opportunities to mediate the tension as well as ensuring its own capability when the allies failed to hold its commitment. The debates presented us with two distinct strategic cultures that defines Australia's defence policies. Yet it is worth noting that strategic culture is not permanent and subject to changes of preference. Strategic culture could change following the regional dan domestic dynamics that shape current situation. The decision to enter AUKUS could very well means reflect a new strategic culture, a descendent and ramification of previous strategic culture, or just strengthening the existing one. Thus, it is important and interesting to see the logic behind AUKUS using strategic culture, as it could dictate the defence policies and its outcome in the region in the years to come.

In the next section, strategic culture and its evolvment as well as how it will be adapted in this paper is explained. After that, the paper briefly presents the roots of subcultures in Australia's strategic cultures and its dynamics. This is followed by the empirical finding sections on how AUKUS reflects Australia's strategic culture and another section which specifically illustrate how the nuclear-submarine deal reinforced Australia's strategic

dependence. Closing in, a final section will conclude this research.

## **Research Methods**

Methodologically, this paper is a qualitative work that will deductively analyse the component of strategic culture. Heavily relied on literature study, it will explore various primary documents such as white papers, doctrines, treaties, agreements, as well as sources like academic works in books, journals, and policy papers to gather data. Further information is also gathered from open-source media coverage and statements. The data then will be reduced and verified through triangulation to ensure its credibility.

## **The Theoretical Concept of Strategic Culture**

Theoretically, strategic culture has evolved into four generations since its inception in the late 1970s. The first generation tried to understand the different behaviors between the US and Soviet Union in terms of nuclear weapons strategy employment, which not necessarily influenced by the balance of system, but based on their respective (cultural) material factors that shaped their strategic value and outlook (Snyder 1977; Gray 1981). Thus, at its core, strategic culture captures the inner belief of a state's military strategy and shapes strategic choices in overcoming threats. The second generation adapted the first, but focused on using state's strategic culture in establishing military power as means to achieve political hegemony (Klein 1991). The third generation attempted to create a rigorous theoretical framework based on dependent variables.

It explores the material and non-material factors that create a system of symbols that instill "*pervasive and long-term strategic preferences by formulating concepts of role and efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs*" (Johnston 1995). Meanwhile, the latest generation, in which this paper will follow, based its analysis on the third generation but focused on analysing subcultures within the state and examining the change and continuity of its strategic culture (Lantis 2002). It also deals with problematizing on why one state sticks with one strategic culture, while others change and adapted to newer ones. As shown above, this paper deals with the subcultures of *strategic dependence* and *self-reliance* in determining Australia's decision in signing the AUKUS. It will look into the logic of thinking between the two subcultures to explain the dilemma Australia faced in entering AUKUS.

## Result

### Understanding Australia's Strategic Culture: A Dilemma

The purpose of this section is to illustrate the roots of Australia's strategic culture which developed into two prominent sides. It looks into the material elements such as geographic conditions, territorial considerations, human, natural resources, and the non-material elements through historical experience, significant documents, doctrines, etc. Geographically, the dilemma concerning Australia's defence is quite clear. It is located far and isolated from its Western allies as it occupies a massive continent with small number of populations which mostly reside in the coastal area. During the colonial era, Australians faced harsh climate and threat of invasion as well as resistance from the inside (Bisley 2016). And before the 20th century, it was situated in a region that was mostly undemocratic and filled with various colonial western powers. This first glimpse of geographical factor explained the "disconnection" between Australia and the region's cultures and values that surrounded it.

Australia's total area reach 7.692 million square km, comprising almost 5% of world's land mass with the coastline up to 36,735 km long (Australian Government 2021). Thanks to its natural resources, Australia managed to established a prosperous economy through the industrialisation, a key feature for national wealth. With a GDP of \$2 trillion, Australia is one of the most prosperous countries in the region and world's 14th largest economy with an ever-growing rate (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Australia 2021). But it lacks the manpower to support and further exploit this potential. Its population is on the small side at only 25.7 million and aggravated by the fact that they mostly occupy the coastal area with its friendlier climate (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Australia 2021). This leaves the outback practically uninhabitable and leads to some development inequality.

The mentioned material elements greatly impacted ADF in several things. In geographical sense, it affects the posture between the three services. The Army used to play dominant roles since 1901, being sent as expeditionary forces in support of the Empire. But since the end of the Second World War, the RAAF (Royal Australian Air Force) and RAN (Royal Australian Navy) received wider attention and increased capability. This is related to Australia's growing interests to guard its "northern gap" where its main *Sea Lines of Communication* (SLOC) is located, the critical veins for its trade and security (Department of Defence of Australia 2020). Personnel wise, in 2016 the ADF active-duty personnel stood only at 58.000, supported by some 19.500 reservists and 17.900 civilians; against this the government



has aimed to increase the active-duty up to 62.400 (Department of Defence of Australia 2016). Further, as a first world country with its resource potentials and advanced industrial technology, Australia's defence industry is relatively small compared to other middle power such as Japan or South Korea. Since 1980s, defence industry is generally aimed to produce small arms and spare-parts component, as well as ambitious project (such as the Collin class submarine) that later intervened by interoperability preference (Department of Defence of Australia 1987).

In non-material elements, several factors contribute in shaping Australia's strategic culture. Ironically, the historical significance when Australia came into being is one of the deepest anxieties related to its defence. It realizes that the invasion of the United Kingdom on the indigenous people back in 18th century could as well happened to them today. In the 19th century, Australia received prominent attention due to the Gold Rush boom and attracted competing western powers in the region, a real first threat of invasion from external forces. It was followed by the *yellow perils* when Chinese immigrants came to take part in the rush and was quickly seen as a threat to the small white European population (Bisley 2016). These episodes planted anxiety on invasion threat "*from the north*" that dictate further defence consideration. As it was an inseparable part of the Commonwealth, Australia and the UK had the mutual responsibility to protect, thus creating the first sense of greater dependence until the start of the Second World War.

The First and Second World War also played important roles. The Great War saw Australia's first expeditionary forces fighting in the bloody Battle of Gallipoli alongside its Commonwealth allies through ANZAC. It cemented Australia's participation in maintaining global order as part of a larger coalition. The intra-war period saw Australia relying on British dominance against the rising Japan. Singapore became the first line of defence, troops were deployed alongside the British, and resulted in the development of Australia's *forward defence* doctrine (McGraw 2011). Unfortunately, Singapore collapsed in 1942, proving *strategic dependence* came without guarantee. Yet luckily, the US came into the rescue as they used Australia as its main operating base throughout the Pacific War. It marked the diversification of Australia's dependence on defence consideration.

During the first half period of the Cold War, communist threat *from the north* became the main concern. US led alliance provided the answers, such as ANZUS and SEATO, and further deepening the bond and reliance towards the US. To prevent the domino from falling, Australia participated in the Korean and Vietnam War, once again relying on the *forward defence* mechanism. Permanent station in Malaysia also followed after

that to mark Australia's presence in Southeast Asia. This era signifies the growing intensity between US and Australia's armed forces. But regional reorientation in Asia-Pacific during the 1970s-1980s presented both challenges and new opportunities. After US defeat in Vietnam and the normalization with China, Australia faced a disoriented defence outlook. US presence began to fade and regional architecture in the north took shape through ASEAN; no significant threat emerged. As the region enjoyed the economic booming, a push towards *self-reliance* started within Australian defence circle. *Forward defence* was evaluated and the armed forces was consolidated through the ADF (Department of Defence of Australia 1976).

The Dibb Rapport, which turned into the 1987 Defence White Paper, shows how documents greatly affect strategic culture. The Rapport effectively reorient the focus towards continental defence and self-reliance which stressed the importance of the northern air and sea control. The ADF is tasked to maintain a capable fighting force to defend Australia in case of a deteriorating situation without foreign help. It also mentioned the need to engage with the neighbouring powers to increase CBMs and maintain stability. Paul Keating's Labor government during the 1990s marked the heyday of *self-reliance* and engagement with Southeast Asia to maintain regional security. Entering the 21st century, Australia was caught in the middle of the Global War on Terror campaign alongside the US, while its immediate region enjoyed quite stability in early 2000s.

This produced a *regional defence plus* outlook where Australia committed itself to prevent global terror threat and also increased regional engagement to maintain stability (Lantis and Charlton 2011). Nevertheless, it became clear that strategic competition is apparent with the rise of China and US response in Indo-Pacific since late 2010s. Major powers became more assertive in pursuing their interest and exerting influence, and Australia need to decide its next step. The explanation above concludes Australia's sub-strategic culture is being influenced by two schools. *Strategic dependence* was born out of anxiety since the inception of Australia, while *self-reliance* was a push that was facilitated by the changing geopolitics during the 1970s. Yet in the millennium era, Australia's defence policy increasingly shows the combination of both sub-strategic cultures to meet today's challenges. *Strategic dependence* is not reliable as experiences showed, yet *self-reliance* also did not guarantee the capability required to defend itself independently. The next chapter shows how AUKUS reflects this dilemma.

### **Observing AUKUS: A Dilemma in Regional Balancing Engagement**

In 2020, the aim of Australia's defence policy is to shape its strategic



environment, to deter actions against threat, and to respond it with credible military force. It clearly mentions its threat perception: the rise of China and the disruption of rules-based order in the region. Australia also acknowledges the bipolar competition between China and the US, and aware of the consequences of this great power rivalry (Department of Defence of Australia 2020). The 2020 Defence Strategic Update explicitly outlined the importance of Australia's continental defence with focus on its immediate region. This area covers "the north-eastern Indian Ocean, through maritime and mainland South East Asia to Papua New Guinea and the South West Pacific" as the "most direct strategic interest" and thus required to grow the ADF's self-reliance for delivering deterrent effects but also maintain the ADF's ability to deploy forces globally where the Government chooses to do so, including in the context of US-led coalitions (Department of Defence of Australia 2020). To ensure this, Australia needs to build and support shared regional interests and initiatives. This is where things get complicated as regional interests are being shaped internally and externally.

Australia realized the importance of ASEAN at the core of Indo-Pacific and the role it could play. Looking back at *self-reliance*, engagement with regional partners and mechanism became an integral part to increase CBMs and shape the preferred environment. Since 1990s, Australia intensively engaged in ASEAN Regional Forum which provides promotion of CBMs, preventive diplomacy, and conflict resolution. It was followed by the ADMM-Plus since 2010s where, as a dialogue partner, it can exert wider initiatives as well as increasing practical cooperation. Parallely, bilateral channel is increasingly boosted through Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships and Defence Cooperation Agreements such as with Indonesia, India, Japan and Singapore. It shows the length Australia will go to increase defence and security ties with regional powers, noting their significance and the freedom Australia may exercise. The engagement provides Australia with opportunity to shape strategic environment alongside its neighbours and increasing the ability to deter threat (Australian Government 2017). Yet, the recent regional initiatives which ASEAN proposed, entitled *ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific* (AOIP), did not show its intended purposes and went without further commitment.

AOIP is ASEAN's attempt to keep competing powers from clashing, yet to continue benefitting regional development. It is indeed an ideal vision, but doesn't reflect current situation where China assertive moves are being challenged with steady presence of US and its allies through the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). To ASEAN, AOIP means exerting strategic autonomy, to others it could very well means compromising the

regional architecture FOIP visioned. Up until now, ASEAN hasn't offered any arrangement that could provide the safety and ability of Australia should the situation deteriorate. Further, Australia didn't able to exercise much freedom in expressing its interests considering it is not "truly being included" in the regional mechanism, acting only as observer and dialogue partner most of the times.

This sense of disconnection roots deep in its strategic culture. FOIP on the other hand is gaining momentum since early 2021 following US presidential inauguration. The US-led initiative could be seen across all level regionally. It engaged through the Quad with India, Japan, and Australia; increasing bilateral joint operations with South Korea, Japan, Philippines and Indonesia; and the recent show off of sea power with European powers like United Kingdom, Netherlands, and Germany around Taiwan and South China Sea (Bhatic 2021; Everington 2021; Reuters 2021). This kind of operations are expected to continue in the near future. And the latest AUKUS deal added those momentum.

To Australia, AUKUS presented not only a logical alternative to the regional initiative offered by ASEAN, but also deeper ties from the past. First, it signalled a commitment of US rebalance in the region since the failed pivot attempt during Obama presidency (Mastro & Cooper 2021). Australia's *self-reliance* was propelled by US intention to "leave" the region following the reconfiguration in the late 1970s, pushing Australia to consider independency. But today's challenge shows Australia's inability to address it independently. US presence is irreplaceable to face China's growing military and its predatory behaviour. With its dilemmatic self-reliance and strategic dependence debate, a clearer US intention is what Australia needed.

Secondly, the trilateral security partnership brought back the initial defence configuration between the three, the UKUSA, which was signed in 1947. Loosely defined, it wasn't a NATO styled treaty or organization, but in fact it was the tie that bind the relationship between the three powers post World War 2 (Ball 2001). Just like AUKUS, it entailed intimate cooperation on Signal Intelligence (SIGINT) that played critical roles during the Cold War up until today. Though foreshadowed by the ANZUS and the Five Eyes arrangement, UKUSA was the critical point in which Australia's strategic dependence on intelligence was planted. In this sense, AUKUS mimics that configuration. It is by no means to provide "security umbrella" but to significantly increase Australia defence capability in terms of intelligence and deterrence power, in short, a technology accelerator.

How this *strategic dependence* in terms of capability and joint operations reliance compromise Australia's defence is at the heart of the issue. In one hand, US commitment provides a relieve and sense of guarantee for support, but historical experiences also showed terrible results. This partnership is expected to provide Australia's with state-of-the-art defence and intelligence technology, but how it will perform operationally according to the demanded task is what matters. Lessons from the past have shown that procurement was heavily intervened to suit the logic of strategic culture, and in the long term resulted in the incapability of Australia to address imminent threats.

### **The Nuclear-Power Submarines and A Reinforced Strategic Culture**

AUKUS entails 3 main strategic subjects, and this part will try to analyse how it fit into Australia's dilemmatic strategic culture in the operational level. But owing to the limited space, it will only emphasize the nuclear-powered submarine procurement, a game changer in the Indo-Pacific theatre. Submarines have two distinct mission, *sea denial* by waiting and guarding the SLOCs from enemy intrusion thus engaging them near the continent, or *sea control* by hunting the enemy in their area of operations far from ours (White 2021). The SSK and SSN have their own strength and weakness, Australia needs to choose one, not without any dilemmatic consideration. Looking back, the would be replaced *Collins* class SSK of the RAN was heavily intervened during its procurement process during the 1980s-1990s. It was originally designed to be an indigenous built submarine capable of conducting near and far off-shore patrol with the latest off the shelf combat management system. This was in line with the logic of *self-reliance* to enable the RAN to guard the continent and securing the SLOCs independently in the *sea denial* role.

However, the project was greatly influenced by US officials and interoperability concept that it ended up acquiring US made (operationally used by US Navy submarines) Raytheon's CCS Mk2 Combat Systems and the Mk48/7 ADCAP torpedo, which initially not particularly suitable for the design of the *Collins* and inferior to its competitors (Kelton 2005). The RAN accepted the idea of dividing tasks with the US Navy, the *Collins* were to act in coastal patrol duties, while the SSN/SSBNs of the US Navy will conduct long-range patrols and relaying the intelligence to the RAN. This intervention was largely because the US Navy SSNs were not capable to perform in the littoral battlespace strategy and thus leaving a gap in their overall coverage, requiring joint operations with conventional SSKs from its allies. Australia gave up their ambitious program in exchange of

interoperability and guarantee of support from the US SSNs fleet.

Fast forward to 2010s, the RAN decided to replace the *Collins* in the spirit of its original project, dubbed the *Attack* class, working together and adopting French-based Naval Group *Barracuda* class SSK as an indigenous program to bolster the defence industry. In 2019, a contract for 12 *Attack* class SSKs was signed. The submarine was to be equipped with the current US Navy combat system and Lockheed Martin torpedo, a demanding task as it requires modification, causing delays and cost overruns. This program was co-chaired by a retired US Navy Rear Admiral (Nobuyuki 2021). By early 2021, initial plan plagued by problems in design modifications and increased costs was rejected by Australia, and France was given the opportunity to come up with a new proposal until September. In late August, the two state leaders affirmed the continuity of the project. This was to be cancelled in the following 2 weeks by AUKUS.

The announcement did not provide the public with extensive information regarding the SSNs, but a few things are clear. There will be an 18 months long process in the AUKUS to decide which current SSN design will be adopted by the RAN and the production schemes. Further, the submarines are going to be built in South Australia, and would not be operational until late 2030s - early 2040, leaving some 15 years gap. The Minister for Defence Industry and Minister for Science and Technology has reiterated the importance of the project for the economy and to propel Australia's defence industry (Price 2021). And lastly, Australia is not to acquire nuclear ballistic weapon system (UK Government 2021). This limited information shall give the readers initial realistic impression on why and how it will impact the capability of Australia's sea defence.

First of all, the 15 years gap means one thing, either the RAN acquire a stop-gap SSKs or pushing the *Collins* operational until early 2040s, and remained in a state of limited joint sea operations with US Navy's SSN as outlined above. Either way, the *strategic dependence* on the divided task of sea operations will still remain, and even reinforced. Without the support of the SSNs, the RAN will be limited only in sea denial capability. Therefore, it is indeed a necessity to have US commitment through the AUKUS (Mastro and Cooper 2021).

Secondly, Hugh White (2021) has illustrated how significant the difference between SSKs and SSNs for the RAN capability. The SSK is slower and it needs to snort from time to time. This means the fleet will have a greater transit time to the area of operations (South China Sea) and shorter operations time shall it conduct *sea control* mission which is to sink adversaries near their base. Further, they are vulnerable to enemy's

anti-submarine warfare as they are slow and unable to stay below surface indefinitely. But when they are to be deployed in a *sea denial* mission, guarding the SLOCs and “waiting around” to sink enemy convoy ships near the continent, the SSK would be the ideal choice. The SSNs on the other hand, are faster and can remain under surface longer without the need to snort to charge its battery. For *sea control* mission, the SSN will have shorter transit time, which means longer time in area of operations (90 days) and harder to be picked up by enemy countermeasures. This make the SSN the ideal hunter to disrupt enemy’s fleet and formidable intelligence gathering asset.

In the case of the SSNs, it could very well mean a reinforce pattern on the sub strategic culture, but also hint a few changes too. Operationally, SSNs will give the RAN a greater capability and freedom to conduct independent sea operations. The RAN will be able to exercise independent sea control-oriented mission, without relying on the support of US Navy submarines like today. It will maximize the potential of the RAN submarine fleet in terms of ISR mission, SLOCs patrols as well as offensive capability in enemy’s area of operations. This in itself signal a sense of *self-reliance* in conducting sea operations, but the highly delicate operational technology and future arrangement of Indo-Pacific will likely keep Australia attached to the US and UK. Acquiring new technology, one that is nuclear, will be costly and highly dependable to the transfer of technology scheme from the US and UK, signalling a greater *strategic dependence*.

The nuclear propulsion maintenance will be entirely dependent on the US and UK expertise and infrastructure to enrich the uranium. Further, the *sea control* means the return of forward defence capability (destroying threats before it threatens the continent), which if one to take a look in the historical background, consistently in line with the outlook of *strategic dependence*. This scenario will likely intensify in the coming years seeing the recent arrangement of allied naval exercise and operations conducted by the FOIP powers in South China Sea and around Taiwan. It means the RAN SSNs fleet will operate alongside its naval counterparts and further deepening their interoperability in joint operations. The SSNs will play specific roles within a greater fleet of allied naval power, thus once again deepening the degree of *strategic dependence* towards alliance.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper has argued that Australia’s decision to enter AUKUS was as a result of current changing geopolitical landscape and how its dilemmatic strategic culture influence its defence policies. Strategically, Australia’s attempt on *self-reliance* outlook would likely result in its

inability to significantly compromise the Indo-Pacific as it was naturally limited from the regional mechanism in ASEAN. US FOIP initiatives, however, presented more opportunity and commitment in maintaining and shaping the Indo-Pacific discourse, like the AUKUS. But at the same time, seeing the multilateral arrangement, *strategic dependence* will once again characterize Australia's policies to suit the interest of the coalition. AUKUS, once again, became the tie that bind the commitment and delivery of weapon system technology between the three, assuring their defence capability against contingencies.

Operationally, the acquisition of the SSN fleet for the RAN will maximize the potential capability of Australia's submarine fleet. It will be able to fulfil its core tasks of guarding the *northern gap* and the SLOCs, while also formidable when deployed in offensive sea control operations. However, seeing the delicate nature of nuclear propulsion technology, Australia is going to rely heavily on US and UK expertise in the production and maintenance of the SSNs. Adding to that, the employment of the SSN will also likely to be a part of large scale allied joint operations that rely on interoperability, which means dependency towards each other's weapon system, strategy and capability. Thus, at the end, AUKUS and its SSNs procurement signalled the return and reinforced pattern of *strategic dependence* within Australia's defence policy.



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