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## Losing the Pacific to the Anglosphere: AUKUS and New Zealand's regional engagement

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### ABSTRACT

New Zealand's potential involvement in AUKUS poses a generational foreign policy decision, engaging competing commitments to Pacific and Anglosphere-centred security. This discussion paper identifies implications for New Zealand's regional engagement, and its previous independent, nuclear-free, and Pacific-led policy approaches. It suggests that the Blue Pacific narrative and Indo-Pacific Strategy are irreconcilable and that AUKUS involvement would undermine support for Pacific priorities of climate, development, and disarmament. We should not underplay what is at stake. New Zealand risks losing the Pacific to the Anglosphere.

### KEYWORDS

Pacific; AUKUS; New Zealand

New Zealand's new coalition government has signalled a heightened interest in involving New Zealand in AUKUS, a security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The likely costs and obligations involved in the AUKUS association make this a generational foreign policy decision that could largely determine New Zealand's approach to increasing geostrategic competition in the Pacific region.

This comment examines government communications and declassified documents the author has obtained through New Zealand's Official Information Act, placing these against the paradigms Pacific Island Countries have outlined for their own security.<sup>1</sup> It argues that New Zealand involvement in AUKUS Pillar Two would undermine a previous commitment to an independent, nuclear free, and Pacific-led foreign policy. My contention is that this approach is not in New Zealand's interests.

### *AUKUS and pillar two*

Announced in September 2021, AUKUS is a trilateral security pact involving Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Its objective is to extend nuclear deterrence, integrate military industrial bases, and develop disruptive technology to maintain the United States' military primacy and contain China's influence.

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AUKUS comprises two pillars. AUKUS ‘Pillar One’ centres around the Australian acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines. AUKUS ‘Pillar Two’ involves developing advanced military technology and increasing interoperability between combat forces.

Together, AUKUS’ two pillars are central to its member nations’ overarching ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ and approach to strategic competition with China. By tightening their political and economic ties and organising them around military power projection in the ‘Indo-Pacific’, AUKUS nations seek to strategically deny China and maintain a favourable geopolitical order. They envisage continued dominance ‘across [potential] warfighting domains,’ be that air, land, sea, space or cyber, and the full ‘spectrum of conflict’, from diplomatic or trade disputes, through proxy or ‘grey zone’ operations, into conventional and even nuclear war (The White House 2023). This effort is based on theories of ‘integrated deterrence’ and represents a total approach to warfare preparedness (Hardy 2021).

AUKUS Pillar Two aims to develop technological advantage and ‘win’ the next generation arms race that is being shaped by new autonomous weapons platforms, electronic warfare systems, and hypersonic missiles. Also known as ‘Advanced Capabilities’, Pillar Two has gained increased prominence as analysts emphasise the ‘game-changing’ potential of such technologies and China’s ‘commanding lead’ in research towards them (Christianson, Monaghan, and Cooke 2023). AUKUS nations intend to open Pillar Two to ‘like-minded’ nations inclined to be Japan, Canada, South Korea and New Zealand. At the time of writing, Japan’s involvement in Pillar Two is being formally considered, and will likely proceed on a project-by-project basis. New Zealand’s status is less clear with involvement contingent on invitation and subsequent consideration by cabinet ministers.

### ***Towards New Zealand involvement***

New Zealand’s prospective involvement in AUKUS Pillar Two forms part of a broader, renewed alignment with the Anglosphere. New Zealand has followed Australia in adopting ‘Indo-Pacific’ framings to describe a ‘deteriorating strategic environment’ (New Zealand Ministry of Defence and New Zealand Defence Force 2023a). Declassified documents from the Ministry of Defence and New Zealand Defence Force (2023b) reiterate that New Zealand ‘shares the same assessment of the geostrategic outlook as the AUKUS partners’, with ‘shared interests in peace, stability, economic prosperity, and multilateralism underpinned by the US’ ability to maintain influence and efficacy as a global superpower’. This alignment is frequently couched as supporting ‘the international rules-based order’ or a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’, and is translated to regional contexts as ‘ensuring a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific’ or ‘peaceful, stable, prosperous and resilient Pacific’ (New Zealand Ministry of Defence 2023a; New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2023a).

To meet this assessment of the geopolitical landscape, New Zealand has recently reviewed its security settings to rebalance the ways its defence and diplomacy operate. A series of reports released in mid-2023 by Foreign Affairs, Defence, and the Intelligence Community emphasised hard security, making the case for reorienting the military from being low-tech, dual civilian purpose, and NZ realm-focused, to being high-tech, combat-ready, and expeditionary (New Zealand Government 2023; New Zealand

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023b; New Zealand Ministry of Defence, 2023b). These reports identified ‘a rising and more assertive China’ as necessitating increased interoperability with AUKUS powers in service of regional stability.

New Zealand officials disclosed a ‘willingness to explore’ involvement in AUKUS Pillar Two in March 2023 (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and New Zealand Ministry of Defence 2023). Ministers then directed officials to consider what AUKUS Pillar Two ‘might offer or mean for New Zealand, on a no commitments basis’. Membership was further discussed during the visits of Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in July, where the latter stressed the ‘door is very much open for New Zealand’ to join. Internal debates within the Labour Party, reportedly between Defence Minister Andrew Little and Minister of Foreign Affairs Nanaia Mahuta, indicated that no conclusive decision was made before parliament rose in late August, with Prime Minister Chris Hipkins stating his preference was for “some other arrangement” at the final leaders’ debate (Fuatai 2023).

Following the general election of October 2023, New Zealand’s new coalition government has moved quickly to service relationships with AUKUS powers. Incoming Foreign Affairs Minister Winston Peters (2023) and Defence Minister Judith Collins have used the rhetoric of ‘stepping up’ and ‘pulling our weight’ in service of strategic objectives New Zealand shares with so-called ‘traditional partners’. They have followed this commitment with the deployment of NZDF personnel to support US-UK led strikes on Houthi rebels in Yemen and participation in the inaugural ANZMIN talks of February 2024 (a two-by-two bilateral between Australia and New Zealand Foreign Affairs and Defence ministers) (Sachdeva 2024). Here, Collins spoke openly about the coalition’s ‘[interest] in being involved in Pillar Two’, adding, ‘it’s not a secret’ (Pennington 2024).

### ***AUKUS, New Zealand, and the pacific***

Over the past year and as part of engagement towards AUKUS, New Zealand has sought to manage down its commitment to aspects of an independent, nuclear free, and Pacific-led foreign policy. This approach has been a mainstay of New Zealand’s diplomacy since the 1980s. It functions both as an expression of Aotearoa’s place in and of the Pacific and its success in hedging superpower competition to foster new relationships following suspension from ANZUS over its anti-nuclear policy. The following section shows how this longstanding approach broadly aligns with and amplifies regional conceptions of security, and how New Zealand involvement in AUKUS would thus represent a symbolic ‘retreat’ from the Pacific into the Anglosphere (Persico 2023; TVNZ 2024).

As it stands, AUKUS has three key implications for New Zealand and its Pacific engagement. The first is that it commits New Zealand’s only formal defence ally, Australia, to US-led military competition with China. AUKUS has required Australia to reorient its political and economic establishment towards US integrated deterrence and to procure nuclear submarines. In turn, AUKUS has put pressure on New Zealand to follow an increased threat assessment of China and increase military spending towards interoperability. This shift has occurred, though not wholly or openly, with New Zealand ministers making oblique reference to ‘consistency’ on China while adopting the coded language of alignment—most pointedly in the ANZMIN talks of February 2024, where they ‘discussed the AUKUS trilateral partnership and agreed it made a

positive contribution toward maintaining peace, security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific' (Tan 2023; New Zealand Government and Australian Government, 2024).

The move away from an 'independent' foreign policy has quickened, despite the concern over the effect AUKUS has had on Australia's sovereignty and its economy, Pacific opposition to militarisation, and the domestic political unease AUKUS-related pacts have generated in several Pacific nations, namely Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu (Hall 2023; Roggeveen 2023; White 2024). For their part, many Pacific nations are concerned that superpower competition is pressuring them to 'pick sides,' going against their long-held mantra of 'friends to all, enemies to none' (Sora 2022). They have offered what is known as the 'China alternative' believing Pacific people can exclude superpower competition without being 'pro-authoritarian,' 'naïve,' or 'victims' (Smith and Wesley-Smith 2021).

The second implication is that AUKUS sets a nuclear proliferation precedent, by exploiting loopholes in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Treaty of Rarotonga (ICAN Australia 2022). Australia, a non-nuclear weapons state, is set to receive highly enriched (weapons-grade) fissile material under AUKUS Pillar One and host nuclear-capable bombers and submarines through associated joint force initiatives. Given the close defence relationship and overall level of interoperability between ANZAC forces this has implications for New Zealand's own non-nuclear security. We should be clear that AUKUS operates a tacit doctrine of nuclear warfighting and that its pillars are interdependent and integrated. Advanced technologies under AUKUS Pillar Two are set to become integral to the operation and modernisation of nuclear weapon delivery systems and associated command, control and communications infrastructure (Letman 2024).

In the Pacific, nuclear issues are closely tied to aspirations for regional self-determination. In a region living with the legacies of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands, Ma'ohi Nui, and Kiribati, there is concern that AUKUS, along with the Fukushima discharge, has ushered in a new nuclearism. Australia has sought endorsements to offset regional concerns about AUKUS, notably at the 52nd Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting and the ANZMIN talks. However, it is clear AUKUS has had a chilling effect on Australia's support for nuclear disarmament, with Anthony Albanese appearing to stall support for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and the universalisation of Rarotonga (Mangioni 2023). New Zealand, which is a firm supporter of both these agreements, must consider that while Pillar Two has been described as 'non-nuclear,' it is unlikely that Pacific people find this distinction meaningful, especially if it means stepping back from such advocacy.

The third is that AUKUS has shifted how its member nations engage the Pacific region, with a greater emphasis on security. The Indo-Pacific Strategy gives AUKUS both its operational demands and a geographic focus. In the Pacific, the need to secure market and military access has driven diplomatic engagement, with an accelerating series of bilateral economic partnerships and security arrangements. Some of these arrangements – including the Papua New Guinea-United States Defence Cooperation Agreement and Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union for example – have been criticised for being opaque and one-sided, based on seeming zero-sum or sphere-of-influence logic symptomatic of an imperial mindset (Ratuva 2023). For Pacific leaders, this heightened interest presents opportunities, typically for bilateral development and security

assistance, but potentially at the expense of Pacific priorities and regional decision-making bodies like the Pacific Islands Forum (Fry, Kabutaulaka, and Wesley-Smith 2022; Powles 2023; Taylor 2023). For New Zealand, this instrumental Indo-Pacific approach to aid and regionalism threatens to displace its Pacific-led engagement and source of influence. New Zealand has invested considerable resources and political capital into its ‘Pacific Reset’ and ‘Resilience’ frameworks. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nanaia Mahuta, explained how this ‘[enabled] New Zealand to do more,’ using a layered, whole of government approach that was ‘partner-led’ and ‘built in Indigenous traditional knowledge [and] gender equity opportunities’ to go ‘beyond [trade], hard security or defence arrangements’ and ‘support the aspirations of the Pacific as they exist’ (Mahuta 2022).

Pacific nations are clear that climate change remains the ‘single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific’ and that genuine security can only be achieved through climate action and people-centred development provided through Pacific-led ‘family first’ regional architecture (PIF 2000, 2018). Pacific leaders have called for a stop to the ‘militarisation’ of the Pacific and ‘a united ocean of peace’. This vision is clearly articulated in the Pacific Islands Forum’s Boe and Biketawa Declarations and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and is fundamentally incompatible with AUKUS (PIFS 2022). Pacific people are quick to point out that Australia has committed upwards of A\$368 billion to nuclear submarines through AUKUS but will not finance its transition away from fossil fuels, or fair share of climate finance and overseas aid, for example.

So while no current Pacific leaders except Fiji’s Sitiveni Rabuka have commented specifically on potential New Zealand involvement in AUKUS Pillar Two, we might observe the reserved responses of Samoa’s Fiamē Naomi Mata’afa and Cook Islands’ Mark Brown (Pearse 2024). When pressed, they have noted New Zealand’s sovereign right to decide, but called for open discussion and reaffirmed their own ‘Blue Pacific’ vision of expanded security (Foon 2024; Rovoï 2024). Unconstrained former leaders, such as the grouping Pacific Elders’ Voice (2023), have been more forthright. New Zealand might recognise the Pacific way of diplomacy at work here.

## Conclusion

Taken together, dominant Pacific opposition to AUKUS is based in the belief that its military focus and reliance on nuclear technologies go against Pacific peoples’ own conceptions of security, which prioritise climate action, nuclear disarmament, and human development.

When I first wrote about AUKUS, I spoke of losing Hawaiki, our place of origin and return, at once the suggestion of a real place and the common heavens (de Jong and Rata 2023). I suggested that peoples of the Pacific must act in the full understanding that our ocean is becoming, once again, a sacrifice zone: a military buffer and climate disaster area. I believe that Canberra, Washington and London have the intel, they see a Pacific region that is facing deepening disaster. But instead of committing to the Blue Pacific narrative, they have sought to integrate it into an Indo-Pacific Strategy, intentionally sidelining Pacific-led regionalism and its priorities, and undermining our best chance at a genuine security.

This gives Aotearoa a choice, between the Pacific and the Anglosphere. Ultimately, any New Zealand involvement in AUKUS must be weighed against other interests and

forms of international influence, but especially in the Pacific. Such a decision is about credibility on regional priorities. Without maintaining principled difference from major polluters and military powers, New Zealand could lose its standing in the Pacific, and by extension the world.

## Note

1. This comment was delivered to an Australia-New Zealand alliance roundtable in Wellington during February 2024, with an extended version published as part of the Security in Context Report: *Rethinking Insecurity in the Blue Pacific Region* in May 2024, <https://www.securityincontext.org/posts/new-sic-report-rethinking-insecurity-in-the-blue-pacific-region>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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