



ARMS CONTROL NEGOTIATION ACADEMY

The Impact of AUKUS and Regional Stability of Asia: What Negotiated Arrangements Could Reduce Proliferation Risks while Preserving Credible Deterrence in the Asia Pacific?

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Note: *The views presented in this memorandum are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the organizations or institutions with which they are affiliated.*

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Policy Memo

TO:

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DATE: May, 2026

SUBJECT: The impact of AUKUS and Regional Stability of Asia: What negotiated Arrangements Could Reduce Proliferation Risks while Preserving the Credible Deterrence in the Asia Pacific?

Abstract

The provision of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia under the trilateral cooperation between Australia, United Kingdom, and United States', known as AUKUS, may not be a violation of the NPT yet poses a significant challenge to international non-proliferation regime. The agreement further impacts the security environment of Asia Pacific. The study covers the responses of key regional players of the Asia Pacific to AUKUS. While applying the Harvard Negotiation Method, the paper identifies Best Alternatives to Negotiated Arrangement (BATNAs) of key players involved and examines that whether a Zone of Possible Agreement (ZOPA) exists that may address proliferation risks while ensuring credible deterrence in the region. The paper further recommends that innovative safeguard arrangement, regional confidence building measures and compensatory non-proliferation arrangements by AUKUS members may address the overall problem.

Keywords: AUKUS, Nuclear Powered Submarine, Non-Proliferation, Asia Pacific, Security

Introduction

The Australia, United Kingdom, and United States' trilateral agreement, known as AUKUS, has reinvigorated debate on many aspects of the deal in academia and policy making circles. Having the core feature of transfer of nuclear-powered submarine capability to Australia, the deal is not merely posing a significant challenge to international nuclear nonproliferation regime but also qualifies to be a harbinger of significant shift in Indo Pacific security.

The AUKUS agreement raises difficult questions for the global nonproliferation regime. Australia, a Non-Nuclear Weapon State (NNWS) under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), is exploiting the loophole in the provisions of the IAEA's Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA) that has no precedent earlier. While legally defensible, this case has generated concerns of international

¹ This memo was written as a requirement of the 2025-2026 Arms Control Negotiation Academy program. Views expressed in the memo are the opinions of the authors and do not reflect the views of their employers.

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community with respect to nuclear nonproliferation. In addition to the proliferation challenge, the Asia Pacific region is confronting additional challenge with respect to its security in the backdrop of the AUKUS agreement.

While examining the proliferation implications of the AUKUS agreement, this policy paper presents an overview of how the countries in Asia Pacific perceive the agreement and what challenge the agreement would pose to the security environment of the Asia Pacific. This analysis identifies the Best Alternatives to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNAs) and searches for a Zone of Possible Agreement (ZOPA). The paper further proposes options for mutual gain followed by the conclusion.

What is AUKUS?

AUKUS is a trilateral agreement between Australia, UK and the US announced on 16th September, 2021.² The security partnership consists of two pillars: Pillar 1 is regarding provision of SSN technology to Australia and enabling it to develop and operate SSN fleet through collaboration between Australia, UK and the US.³ As a result of this deal, Australia will be in the position to develop its own Virginia-class SSN-AUKUS submarines by the 2050s independently.⁴ To achieve this end, Australia will initially procure three new Virginia class Nuclear Submarines by the US (with the possibility of provision of two more submarines if required) by 2030.⁵ At the second stage, Australia will develop SSN-AUKUS submarines utilizing UK's next-generation advanced submarine design and the U.S.'s cutting-edge nuclear submarine technology to ultimately develop its own fleet by 2050.⁶

As far as the Pillar 2 of the AUKUS deal is concerned, three countries will cooperate in the field of advanced technologies like undersea robotics, artificial intelligence, hypersonic, quantum technology, cybersecurity, and electronic warfare, etc.⁷ To some, Pillar 2 of the AUKUS deal is Plan B to equip Australia with military deterrence capabilities.⁸

AUKUS: A Violation of the NPT?

Australia plans to use High Enriched Uranium (HEU) to power its SSN fleet. HEU will be loaded for the entire lifespan of a nuclear submarine without refueling.⁹ The arrangement will enable Australia to operate nuclear submarines without developing any domestic nuclear infrastructure that Australia

² Choe Wongi, "AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Regional Security: Strategic Implications for South Korea" *IFANS Perspectives*, June 25, 2024, <https://www.ifans.go.kr/knda/ifans/eng/pblct/PblctView.do;jsessionid=x0610BIBtracQY0WoM6nKmrl.public22?csrfPreventionSalt=null&sn=14340&boardSe=pbl&pblctDtaSn=14340&clCode=P19&menuCl=P19&searchKeyWord=&pageIndex=1> (Accessed Oct 15, 2025)

³ Wongi, "AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Regional Security: Strategic Implications for South Korea"

⁴ Wongi, "AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Regional Security: Strategic Implications for South Korea"

⁵ Wongi, "AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Regional Security: Strategic Implications for South Korea"

⁶ Wongi, "AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Regional Security: Strategic Implications for South Korea"

⁷ Wongi, "AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Regional Security: Strategic Implications for South Korea"

⁸ Choe Wongi, "AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Regional Security: Strategic Implications for South Korea"

⁹ Ristian Atriandi Supriyanto, "AUKUS and Southeast Asia's Non-Proliferation Concerns", July 5, 2022, <https://basicint.org/aukus-and-southeast-asia/> (Accessed: Oct 24, 2025)

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lacks at the moment.¹⁰

The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) does not bar Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS) from developing and operating nuclear powered submarines.¹¹ IAEA safeguards too cannot be applied on nuclear powered submarines as their locations are meant to be secret. Mainly for this reason IAEA's Comprehensive Safeguard Agreement (CSA) (Article) 14 allows NNWS keep the material for use in "non-proscribed military activity" that is naval reactors out of IAEA safeguards.¹²

Why does it Pose a Challenge to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime?

Apparently, the provision and development of nuclear submarines by the US is not violating any of the treaties yet the deal may still cause a serious dent to the international non-proliferation efforts for a number of reasons:

- I) *Stationing nuclear weapons:* The possibility of AUKUS submarines being utilized to carry US nuclear weapons under a dual key arrangement cannot be ruled out in future considering the US 'sharing' of nuclear weapons with its NATO allies.¹³ Such apprehensions are further strengthened by the fact that Russia is also considering to set up a NATO like arrangement with Belarus.¹⁴
- II) *A Dangerous Precedent:* The precedent of provision of SSN technology to Australia may encourage other aspirants of naval nuclear propulsion in future. In the past Brazil and Canada have seriously considered to develop nuclear submarines.¹⁵ Similarly, South Korea may also emulate the Australian example.¹⁶ Furthermore, Iran, in 2018, informed the IAEA of its intention to withdraw nuclear material from IAEA safeguards for use in naval nuclear propulsion, but it could not materialize.¹⁷
- III) *The Issue of Non-Proliferation Assurances:* AUKUS nonproliferation assurances represent reversible, unilateral or trilateral policy options rather than a verifiable legally binding arrangement. The issue with respect to AUKUS nonproliferation assurances is also of their execution. For example, IAEA safeguards are not specifically designed for nuclear submarines and to ensure that nuclear material being consumed to power nuclear submarines will not be diverted for nuclear weapon purposes considering the level of secrecy involved in submarine operations.¹⁸
- IV) *Australia's Past Interest & Capabilities:* Although it is a remote possibility that Australia

¹⁰ Supriyanto, "AUKUS and Southeast Asia's Non-Proliferation Concerns", July 5, 2022

¹¹ James M. Acton, "Why the AUKUS Submarine Deal Is Bad for Non-proliferation—And What to Do About It", September 21, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2021/09/why-the-aukus-submarine-deal-is-bad-for-nonproliferationand-what-to-do-about-it?lang=en> (Accessed: Nov 12, 2015)

¹² Acton, "Why the AUKUS Submarine Deal Is Bad for Non-proliferation—And What to Do About It"

¹³ Toby Dalton and Ariel Levite, "AUKUS as a Non-proliferation Standard?", (Accessed: Oct 14, 2025) July/August 2023, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2023-07/features/aukus-nonproliferation-standard>,

¹⁴ Dalton and Levite, "AUKUS as a Non-proliferation Standard?"

¹⁵ Acton, "Why the AUKUS Submarine Deal Is Bad for Non-proliferation—And What to do About it"

¹⁶ Supriyanto, "AUKUS and Southeast Asia's Non-Proliferation Concerns"

¹⁷ Acton, "Why the AUKUS Submarine Deal Is Bad for Non-proliferation".

¹⁸ Dalton and Levite, "AUKUS as a Non-proliferation Standard?"

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may develop nuclear weapons in the future it cannot be ignored that Australia had adopted various paths to develop nuclear weapons after 1945, including by collaborating with the UK and the US.¹⁹ If Australia decides to abandon its non-proliferation commitments and decides to develop nuclear weapons, it would be at far more advanced stage by possessing readily available HEU provided under AUKUS agreement.²⁰

What Does the Region Think?

United States—United Kingdom—Australia

The key actor in AUKUS is the United States, who views the arrangement as a central pillar of its Indo-Pacific strategy. By embedding Australia into the U.S. submarine industrial base and the eventual forward-deployment of U.S. Virginia-class submarines to Australian ports, the arrangement increases allied presence without expanding formal U.S. territorial basing. Therefore, AUKUS functions not only as deterrence signaling toward Beijing but as a signal of long-term alliance commitment. It locks Australia into the U.S. extended deterrence architecture for decades through shared infrastructure, supply chains, and maintenance cycles.²¹

The United Kingdom is similarly committed to AUKUS. Participation in the joint development of the SSN-AUKUS submarine design reasserts Britain's status as a premier military actor with advanced nuclear propulsion expertise.²² The arrangement revitalizes the UK's submarine industrial base while reinforcing the strategic importance of the U.S.–UK defense relationship. For London, AUKUS functions as both geopolitical signaling and industrial policy, enabling Britain to reinsert itself into Indo-Pacific security affairs after decades of reduced presence.²³

AUKUS is backed by bipartisan consensus in Australia, with Canberra allocating significant resources to bring the deal into reality. In February 2026, Australia announced it would allocate \$2.7 billion to

¹⁹ Dalton and Levite, "AUKUS as a Non-proliferation Standard?"

²⁰ Dalton and Levite, "AUKUS as a Non-proliferation Standard?"

²¹ Derek Grossman, "The State—and Fate—of America's Indo-Pacific Alliances", *RAND Commentary*, Nov 1, 2024,

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/11/the-state-and-fate-of-americas-indo-pacific-alliances.html>, (Accessed: Oct, 20, 2025)

²² UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. 2024. "Nuclear Safeguards and the NPT: AUKUS Side Event, July 2024." GOV.UK, November 15.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nuclear-safeguards-and-the-npt-aukus-side-event-july-2024> ; and UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. 2025. "Nuclear Safeguards and the NPT: AUKUS Side Event, May 2025." GOV.UK, June 13.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nuclear-safeguards-and-the-npt-aukus-side-event-may-2025>, (Accessed: Oct, 20, 2025)

²³"Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World". London: Cabinet Office, March 13, 2023,

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/641d72f45155a2000c6ad5d5/11857435_NS_IR_Refresh_2023_Supply_AllPages_Revision_7_WEB_PDF.pdf; (Accessed: Oct, 20, 2025)

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develop a nuclear submarine shipyard.²⁴ At the same time, domestically, the issue of procuring and developing nuclear powered submarines is under debate and apprehensions have been expressed by former officials that implementation of AUKUS will eat up funding for other military projects.²⁵

China – Russian Federation

The People's Republic of China sees the deal as disaster for its interests in the region. AUKUS will deliver unlimited endurance and stealth characteristics that will not only expand the operational radius of the Australian Navy from the South China Sea to the Western Pacific but also potentially undermine the effectiveness of China's "Anti-Access/Area Denial" (A2/AD) strategy. This nuclear submarine force may possess underwater blockading capabilities in a Taiwan Strait conflict in the future, providing key support for the US's deterrence strategy and forming a new option for military intervention in regional hotspot issues.²⁶ For China, this directly affects, not only its ability to maneuver on Taiwan, but also its growing interests in the region and its view could trigger an arms race in Asia.

It will come as no surprise that the Russian Federation's position is closely aligned with that of China. Officials and state media of both states portray the pact as driven by Cold War thinking and a part of a Western strategy to contain their influence and freedom of maneuver in the Indo-Pacific.

Both have objected at the IAEA, stating that the AUKUS deal would involve the transnational transfer of weapons-grade nuclear materials, in violation of a series of international regulations, including the NPT. The cooperation between the three countries therefore constitutes, in their view, an act of nuclear proliferation.²⁷

Japan – South Korea - Taiwan

AUKUS forced Japan and South Korea into an uncomfortable position. Both rely on U.S. extended deterrence while facing growing maritime and missile pressure from neighboring states.

Japan has cautiously welcomed AUKUS, viewing cooperation under Pillar II, including advanced

²⁴ "Australia pledges \$2.7 billion to progress nuclear submarine shipyard build.", *Reuters*, February 15, 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australia-pledges-27-billion-progress-nuclear-submarine-shipyard-build-2026-02-15/> (Accessed: Oct, 20, 2025)

²⁵ Collin Clark, "AUKUS will 'cannibalize' other programs with no budget boost: Former top Aussie general", Nov 20, 2024, <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/11/former-top-aussie-general-warns-aukus-will-cannibalize-other-program-s-with-no-defense-boost/> (Accessed: Oct, 21, 2025)

²⁶ Abdi Manab Idris, Nugroho Adi Sasongko, and Yanif Dwi Kuntjoro, "AUKUS Cooperation in the Form of Australian Nuclear Submarine Technology for Stability in Indo-Pacific Region", *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences* (RSIS International), Vol.6, No.2, March 8, 2022, p.747, <https://www.rsisinternational.org/journals/ijriss/Digital-Library/volume-6-issue-2/745-750.pdf>, (Accessed: Oct, 20, 2025)

²⁷ Note of the Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the International Atomic Energy Agency (INFCIRC/1034), September 14, 2022, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/infcircs/2022/infcirc1034_ch.pdf. (Accessed: Oct, 25, 2025)

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technologies such as quantum communication and undersea systems, as a potential force multiplier.²⁸ Although Tokyo has not expressed intent to pursue nuclear-powered submarines, it possesses advanced fuel-cycle capabilities, making AUKUS precedent relevant for long-term strategic calculations.²⁹

South Korea has responded more cautiously, balancing alliance obligations with significant economic ties to China. Public debates regarding indigenous nuclear deterrence have periodically resurfaced, and discussions about a nuclear-powered submarine capability have emerged within defense circles. However, Seoul has thus far remained cautious about formal association with AUKUS Pillar II, even as it explores pathways for advanced-technology cooperation with AUKUS partners.³⁰ AUKUS therefore sharpens, rather than resolves, questions about extended deterrence credibility and nuclear latency in Northeast Asia.

Taiwan is not formally connected to AUKUS but stands to benefit indirectly from increased allied undersea presence in the Western Pacific.³¹ Enhanced submarine operations could complicate potential blockades or coercive scenarios across the Taiwan Strait. At the same time, visible expansion of allied military capabilities may intensify Beijing's threat perceptions, adding complexity to cross-strait deterrence dynamics.

Association of South Asian Nations (ASEAN)

On the surface, ASEAN appears unified in expressing concern about AUKUS. Joint statements from the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meetings between 2021 and 2023 have consistently flagged nuclear proliferation risks and invoked the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) as a framework the deal potentially undermines.³² Below that surface, however, member states are pulling in different directions.

Malaysia and Indonesia have taken the most cautious line. Both have called on the IAEA to conduct a thorough investigation and warned of risks to regional sea-lanes and the broader maritime order.³³ They fear that AUKUS sets a precedent that accelerates an arms race rather than containing one.

Singapore and Vietnam have adopted a more calculating posture. Both seek technological dividends

²⁸ "12th Japan–Australia 2+2 Foreign and Defense Ministerial Consultations ("2+2")." Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan Press Release, Sep 5, 2025, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_01633.html, (Accessed: Nov, 11, 2025)

²⁹ Gabriel Dominguez, "Benefits and Risks: AUKUS Looks to Take Gamble on Japan." April 17, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/04/17/japan/politics/japan-aukus-pillar-2-explainer/>, (Accessed: Nov, 11, 2025)

³⁰ "AUKUS and Indo-Pacific Security", *Congressional Research Service*, March 3, 2025 <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12113>, (Accessed: Sep, 20, 2025)

³¹ "AUKUS and Indo-Pacific Security", *Congressional Research Service*,

³² "ASEAN Reaffirms Commitment to Keep Region Free of Nuclear Weapons." July 9, 2025. <https://english.news.cn/asiapacific/20250709/66c7bae7ae5d4f828a80d7c7ee198231/c.html> (Accessed: Sep, 20, 2025)

³³ "Indonesia's Response to AUKUS", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, Press Statement, Sep 17, 2021; and "Malaysia's Position on AUKUS." Ministry of Foreign Affairs Statement, Sep 18, 2021.

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through selective engagement while stopping short of formal endorsement.³⁴ They remain wary of the military escalation the deal could provoke.

The Philippines stands apart entirely. Manila has welcomed AUKUS, a position rooted not in rhetoric but in the structural reality of its active territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea.³⁵ Where other ASEAN members hedge, the Philippines sees allied undersea capability as a net contribution to regional stability.

The result is a bloc that speaks with one voice in formal communiqués and fragments the moment strategic interests are put on the table.

How Does It Impact Regional Security?

Keeping aside the nuclear proliferation argument, the AUKUS agreement contributes to the structural shifts in the regional security architecture. The deal is concerning for producing two subsequent strategic outcomes:

Firstly, AUKUS alters the regional military balance by introducing long-endurance, stealth undersea platforms with extended operational reach. Their integration into a wider network of forward operating locations further shifts regional force posture from localized presence toward distributed and coordinated deployment patterns. This compresses strategic depth in contested maritime zones and raises both deterrence credibility and escalation sensitivity in crisis scenarios.³⁶

Secondly, Australian nuclear-powered submarines significantly enhance persistent presence and sea-denial capabilities across large maritime spaces, thereby increasing the density and intensity of undersea competition. Furthermore, cooperation in advanced technologies—such as artificial intelligence, quantum systems and cyber capabilities—extends strategic competition into the technological domain and embeds security priorities into innovation and supply-chain structures. These dynamics risk widening capability asymmetries and reinforcing bloc-like patterns within the Indo-Pacific security order.

Where do we go from here?

Well, so far there has been a lot of posturing and what can be described as a return to old power-based arguments. However, framing the issue in those dynamics, obscures the fact that AUKUS represents an ongoing negotiation problem rather than a settled outcome. Applying the Harvard Negotiation Method helps clarify how the parties could advance in a way that may mitigate proliferation risks while preserving regional stability.

BATNAs: The Costs of Non-Agreement

³⁴ “MFA Spokesperson’s Comments on AUKUS”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, September 16, 2021; and “Spokesperson’s Remarks on AUKUS”, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2021, September 23, 2021.

³⁵ Department of Foreign Affairs (Philippines). 2021. “Statement on the Trilateral Security Partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS).” September 19, 2021.

³⁶ Idris, Sasongko and Kuntjoro, “AUKUS Cooperation in the Form of Australian Nuclear Submarine Technology for Stability in Indo-Pacific Region,”

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An analysis of the Best Alternatives to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA) reveals that none of the major actors involved are well served by the absence of at least some sort of negotiated accommodation.

For the AUKUS members, the primary BATNA is to proceed with the submarine transfer and advanced defense cooperation under existing safeguards arrangements. While this option preserves near-term deterrence gains, it carries significant long-term costs. These costs include erosion of trust in the non-proliferation regime and increased diplomatic resistance from regional states. Importantly it tells others that the rulebook does not apply to all, thus, increasing the risk that the AUKUS precedent will be invoked by future proliferators. The reputational cost to the NPT system and the IAEA may ultimately undermine the normative framework upon which AUKUS members themselves rely.

China and Russia's BATNA consists of sustained diplomatic opposition, institutional contestation within multilateral forums, and accelerated military counter-balancing. While this approach allows both states to signal resolve and defend their interpretation of non-proliferation norms, it also risks entrenching arms race dynamics and marginalizing their influence over the evolution of safeguards governance. Persistent obstruction without engagement may weaken their ability to shape outcomes they view as strategically and normatively significant.

For ASEAN and other regional middle powers, the BATNA is continued strategic hedging and rhetorical ambiguity, a strategy that is in a way the one being pursued by the region now. While this avoids immediate alignment costs, it also threatens ASEAN centrality and reduces regional agency in shaping the security architecture of the Indo-Pacific. Over time, passivity risks normalizing decisions taken without regional consultation, undermining nuclear-weapon-free zone commitments and regional confidence-building mechanisms.

Finally, for the global non-proliferation regime itself, the BATNA is ad-hoc adaptation. Allowing safeguards exceptions to be handled case by case risks creating precedents that are technically legal but politically destabilizing, weakening incentives for compliance by other non-nuclear-weapon states.

Taken together, these BATNAs suggest that unilateral or non-cooperative paths impose significant costs on all actors, creating incentives to explore negotiated solutions.

ZOPA: Identifying the Space for Agreement

Despite polarized rhetoric, a Zone of Possible Agreement (ZOPA) exists when we examine the underlying interests separately from their stated positions. AUKUS members' core interest lies in credible deterrence, operational effectiveness, and alliance cohesion—not in weakening non-proliferation norms. Conversely, China, Russia, and many regional states are primarily concerned with preventing precedent-setting proliferation risks and unchecked erosion of safeguards—not necessarily with reversing AUKUS itself.

This distinction is critical. While the existence of AUKUS may be non-negotiable for its members, the modalities of implementation, oversight, and transparency may be open to negotiation. Similarly,

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critics of AUKUS may find greater leverage in shaping safeguards innovations and confidence-building measures than in seeking outright cancellation. The ZOPA therefore lies in negotiated mechanisms that reduce proliferation risk and enhance predictability without negating strategic deterrence objectives.

Options for Mutual Gain: Policy Pathways Forward

Several policy options emerge that could generate mutual gains and stabilize the regional security environment.

First, AUKUS members could voluntarily pursue enhanced and innovative IAEA safeguards arrangements tailored specifically to naval nuclear propulsion. By exceeding minimum legal requirements and allowing for greater transparency, AUKUS states could reinforce regime credibility while retaining operational secrecy. This would address concerns of precedent abuse without constraining legitimate defense cooperation.

Second, the establishment of regional confidence-building measures related to nuclear propulsion could help reduce misperceptions. Regular briefings, notification mechanisms, or structured dialogues involving ASEAN and other affected regional actors would signal restraint and inclusivity. Such measures would strengthen regional trust while preserving the strategic utility of AUKUS.

Third, multilateral discussions aimed at clarifying the interpretation of Article 14 of the IAEA Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement could prevent future exploitation by potential proliferators. Framing this effort as forward-looking norm clarification rather than retroactive restriction would allow all parties to claim normative gains without political loss of face.

Finally, AUKUS states could pursue compensatory non-proliferation initiatives in parallel, such as reinforcing disarmament diplomacy, signing and ratification of Treaty on Prohibition of nuclear weapons (TPNW) by Australia, supporting nuclear-weapon-free zones, or expanding nuclear fuel assurances for civilian use. These measures would help balance exceptional security arrangements with broader regime responsibilities.

Conclusion

AUKUS is not merely a defense pact; it is a stress test for the global non-proliferation regime and regional security governance. It brings additional risk to a region already dealing with large proliferation questions, further risking instability and conflict.

Viewing it through a negotiation lens reveals that escalation and unilateralism are suboptimal outcomes for all parties. By recognizing weak BATNAs, identifying a viable ZOPA, and pursuing options for mutual gain, stakeholders can move toward a more stable equilibrium. One that accommodates strategic realities while preserving the integrity of non-proliferation norms. This policy paper has outlined a number of potential actions that could be pursued for mutual gain.

The future of regional stability in the Indo-Pacific will depend not on whether AUKUS exists, but on how its risks are managed through negotiated, inclusive, and forward-looking policy choices.

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James To is currently pursuing a PhD in International Studies at the University of Washington. His research examines how emerging technologies and domestic motivations shape China's space strategy and nuclear policy. He has over a decade of experience in strategic deterrence across various roles within the U.S. nuclear enterprise. His work seeks to improve understanding of crisis dynamics and strategic stability. James holds a BA in International Studies from Texas A&M University and an MS in Political Science from the University of Nebraska.