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Is an AUKUS Expansion on the Cards?

Manoj Harjani

SYNOPSIS

*Reports of Canada seeking to join AUKUS – a trilateral security agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States centred on sharing military technology – prompt the question of whether expansion of its membership is possible. **MANOJ HARJANI** ponders whether Canada's successful admission to AUKUS will mean that other countries stand a chance of joining as well.*

COMMENTARY

Earlier this month, a [report](#) by the *Globe and Mail* claimed that Canada was seeking to join the AUKUS military technology sharing agreement named after its three signatories – Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Responding to media queries about the report, Canada's defence minister Anita Anand [said](#) that "Canada is highly interested in furthering cooperation on AI, quantum computing and other advanced technologies with a defence nexus with our closest allies."

Canada's exclusion from AUKUS when it was signed in 2021 was perceived as a [snub](#) given its membership of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance (FVEY). FVEY comprises the three AUKUS countries as well as Canada and New Zealand, with roots tracing back to the Second World War.

When AUKUS was signed, Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [downplayed](#) the perception that the country had been excluded by highlighting the fact that AUKUS

was focused on nuclear-powered submarines, which “Canada is not currently or anytime soon in the market for”.

Although the centrepiece of AUKUS was indeed an agreement by the United Kingdom and the United States to support Australia’s acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, it also [covered](#) “cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities”.

Given Canada’s recent expression of interest to participate in AUKUS, is an expansion on the cards? Should Canada eventually gain admission to AUKUS, the immediate implication will be that other countries – including those outside FVEY – can join as well. At the same time, an expansion of AUKUS will necessitate revisiting questions that have already been raised about the growing role and overlap of minilateral platforms.



US President Joe Biden, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese speak at the AUKUS trilateral meeting in San Diego, California, March 2023. Canada has recently expressed interest to participate in AUKUS although the US’ original position was that the trilateral security agreement would not expand to include other countries. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

AUKUS and its Significance

When Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States announced the AUKUS agreement in September 2021, some countries reacted negatively. China’s *Global Times* – a mouthpiece for the Chinese Communist Party – [described](#) it as yet another expression of a “Cold War mentality”, while France called AUKUS a “betrayal” as it led to the [cancellation](#) of its existing US\$60 billion deal to supply attack submarines to Australia.

In Southeast Asia, reactions were [mixed](#). Leaders in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines expressed concern regarding an escalating arms race in the region, while Singapore and Vietnam’s responses indicated implicit support. Thailand did not issue a formal response, which may have been a pragmatic attempt to [avoid taking sides](#). ASEAN similarly [stayed silent](#), reflecting longstanding divisions among its member states on great power contestation in the region.

A key issue was the [secrecy](#) surrounding the negotiations for AUKUS, which took allies and partners of the three countries involved by surprise. Furthermore, many countries did not make a distinction between nuclear-powered submarines and nuclear-armed submarines, and concerns regarding nuclear proliferation have [persisted](#).

At the same time, overemphasis on the submarine dimension of AUKUS has meant that considerably less attention is being paid to its [other aspects](#), collectively referred to as “Pillar II”. These include developing capabilities in autonomous underwater vehicles, quantum technologies, AI, advanced cyber defence, hypersonic weapons, and electronic warfare.

While these technologies are largely nascent at present, they are expected to define the future of warfare. For example, AI is expected to play a role in improving the speed and precision of real-time decision-making on the battlefield, while quantum technologies offer the promise of “un-hackable” communications.

Potential for Expansion

Canada’s desire to participate in Pillar II of AUKUS is not without obstacles. The country has [dragged its feet](#) on keeping up with NATO’s goal of spending 2% of its GDP annually on defence, only reaching 1.29% for the 2022/2023 fiscal year.

Nevertheless, Canada is [positioned well](#) to participate in AUKUS beyond its existing membership of FVEY. It has a unique exemption under the United States’ International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR), and its defence industry participates in the US National Technology and Industrial Base established in the 1990s.

Furthermore, Canada’s strengths in specific technologies could be an asset to a number of focus areas under Pillar II. For example, it has a robust research and development ecosystem in AI, ranked [fifth](#) out of 29 countries in the Global AI Vibrancy ranking developed by Stanford University.

Canada is also a global leader in quantum technologies. Its Department of National Defence launched the “[Quantum 2030](#)” roadmap in March 2023, which identified focus areas such as quantum-enhanced radar and networking to develop prototypes for field testing by the end of this decade.

In addition, under the Innovation for Defence Excellence and Security (IDeAS) programme, Canada is encouraging research in areas such as autonomous vehicles and cyber defence which overlap with Pillar II of AUKUS. IDeAS is backed by approximately [US\\$1.2 billion](#) in funding up to 2038.

Implications of AUKUS Expansion

Other than Canada, FVEY member New Zealand has also [signalled](#) a desire to participate in Pillar II of AUKUS. If both countries are admitted, this would reverse concern that FVEY was effectively [split](#) by AUKUS and revitalise security cooperation in the Anglosphere.

India and Japan have also been cited as potential future members of AUKUS given their membership of the “Quad” grouping with Australia and the United States. However, the United States’ [original position](#) in 2021 was that AUKUS would not be expanded to include other countries.

Nevertheless, the war in Ukraine has since [shifted](#) American attitudes towards sharing military technology. It may also have paved the way for [reform of ITAR](#), which is seen as a major stumbling block to American efforts to build up the technological capabilities of its allies and partners to counter China in the Indo-Pacific.

In Southeast Asia, attitudes towards AUKUS have been softening recently. For example, following the March 2023 [announcement](#) of details regarding Australia’s acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, Malaysia and Indonesia offered [more nuanced responses](#) compared to 2021, which suggested a degree of accommodation.

What remains an open question, however, is how AUKUS and other minilateral platforms that have emerged in recent years within the Indo-Pacific will continue to evolve. Beyond the concerns that such arrangements pose for ASEAN’s [centrality](#), overlaps between the various initiatives also pose a challenge for effective coordination, particularly as more countries are pivoting their defence strategies to include an emphasis on the Indo-Pacific.

Manoj HARJANI is a Research Fellow with the Military Transformations Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).