

Sydney Peace Foundation

Submission to the Public Inquiry into AUKUS

Submitted by Melanie Morrison on behalf of the Sydney Peace Foundation
15 August, 2026

The Sydney Peace Foundation is dedicated to the promotion of peace with justice and to non-violent conflict resolution. We welcome the opportunity to make this submission to the Public Inquiry into AUKUS. We do so with significant concern as to what the AUKUS Agreement means for peace and security in Australia's region.

The AUKUS Agreement, announced on 15 September 2021 without prior parliamentary debate, public consultation, or Treasury costing, represents one of the most consequential, expensive, and least scrutinised commitments in Australia's history.

At an estimated cost of at least \$368 billion over 30 years (and rising), AUKUS demands urgent, transparent, and independent review. It also requires that Parliament give due weight to the outcomes of this inquiry and to the concerns of a growing number of Australians who question the exorbitant cost of an Agreement that lacks accountability and erodes Australia's independence, sovereignty and security.

Australia contributed to the drafting of the United Nations Charter which enshrines the global community's commitment to the peaceful resolution of conflict, expressing its determination:

"to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small."

At this critical juncture in global affairs, Australia must look to reaffirm this Charter and the commitment to collective peacebuilding. We believe that Australia must move beyond the logic of militarisation and war preparation and consider, more broadly, what genuine collective peace and security mean for our region. Australia has long styled itself as a champion of international law and of strong multilateral institutions yet, as set out below, AUKUS does not sit well with this legacy.

Regional Peace and Security

Australia's security is inseparable from the collective security of our region, yet our closest neighbours in the Asia-Pacific were not consulted before AUKUS was announced. This represents a striking failure of regional collaboration by our previous government, and one that undermines trust in Australia's regional bilateral relationships and standing in regional multilateral forums.

To our north, Indonesia, Malaysia, and other ASEAN countries have expressed deep concern. Indonesia's government stated it was "deeply concerned over the continuing arms race and power projection in the region," while Malaysia warned that AUKUS could unleash a dangerous phase of regional nuclear proliferation. Southeast Asia and the ASEAN region are Australia's natural partners in responding to traditional security challenges such as geopolitical rivalry, and non-traditional challenges such as transnational crime, terrorism, and climate change. The hyper-militarised AUKUS deal can only undermine the trust-building and cooperation necessary to strengthen these regional partnerships.

To our east, Pacific Island leaders, already confronting existential threats from climate change, are rightly troubled by Australia's expanding military integration with nuclear powers rather than its engagement with the region's stated security priorities. A statement issued by Pacific civil society in July 2026 opposed all forms of militarisation and nuclear threats in the Pacific. If Australia is to remain embedded in its natural geographic home of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, and to play a constructive and collaborative leadership role in these regions, it should do so by building transparent bilateral relationships and supporting the region's developing web of multilateral security cooperation; not by pursuing large, secretive projects such as AUKUS, which risk being seen as militaristic, indifferent to the region's collective needs, and narrowly Western-centric and US-focused.

Any organisation genuinely committed to peace understands that lasting security is built through dialogue, diplomacy, and multilateral engagement. As alliances shift and the balance of power moves away from traditional actors such as the United States, Australia would do well to recognise its geographic place within the Asia-Pacific region, since AUKUS risks severely eroding our regional trust, moral authority, and capacity to negotiate in good faith.

Indeed, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Australia in the World 2025 Snapshot identifies foreign policy as a key element of our national power, explaining that Australia can best protect its security, stability, and prosperity in a time of growing uncertainty by focusing on the region where our interests are most at stake, investing in more diverse relationships alongside traditional ones, and upholding the international rules that protect us all.

Treaty Obligations

Australia is a signatory to the Treaty of Rarotonga (South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty). The AUKUS agreement, however, places Australia in direct tension with the aspiration of a nuclear-free Pacific.

While the Government maintains that these vessels will carry no nuclear weapons, this distinction becomes increasingly difficult to sustain given that Australia has not signed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), despite this being stated Labor Party policy. More than 100 states, a majority of the world's countries, have signed, ratified, or acceded to the TPNW. Australia, despite its rhetoric, remains an outlier. Our drift into a nuclear enabled defence force only serves to underline the importance of Australia formally showing its commitment to this treaty.

Independent Foreign Policy

AUKUS undermines Australia's independence and sovereignty. It locks Australia into a 50-year commitment to the foreign and military policies of the United States and the United Kingdom. And now we are told that US troops could be stationed here indefinitely. All three original leaders who announced AUKUS have since left office, and as US foreign policy grows increasingly unpredictable, Australia's capacity to exercise independent judgment on questions of peace and security (a fundamental pillar of our national security) should not be so deeply compromised.

AUKUS will serve to embed Australia fully within US military planning and interests at Pine Gap, Darwin, and HMAS Stirling, with detrimental consequences for Australia's ability to pursue an independent path, particularly given our geographic location. A truly sovereign foreign policy would diversify Australia's security relationships across the region rather than binding our long-term strategic capability to distant, traditional allies.

Legal and sovereign risks are glaringly apparent at Pine Gap, the ground station for US signals intelligence outside Alice Springs. Investigative reporting has found that intelligence collected and processed at Pine Gap is passed to the US National Security Agency and shared with Israel's military, for likely use in targeting operations in Gaza. Under international law, attacks that deliberately target civilians and civilian infrastructure are war crimes.

We are told that nuclear-powered submarines and the AUKUS pact are essential to protect Australia from China. This threat narrative obscures the reality that China is contained by US military bases stretching from Japan to the Philippines to Australia. Australia should not become further embedded as a launching pad for American military operations, equipped with second-hand nuclear-powered submarines that may not even arrive on schedule and that are designed not to defend Australia but to serve America's interests in the Asia-Pacific.

Rather than investing in costly white elephants such as these submarines, and tying our national security ever more closely to an increasingly erratic and unpredictable power, Australia should instead invest in deepening regional relationships and working with our neighbours on a sustainable, collective response to emerging geopolitical challenges.

Australia's Reliance on International Law

As a middle power and island trading nation, Australia's prosperity and security rest overwhelmingly on the maintenance of a stable, rules-based international order, rather than on hard military power alone. Almost all of Australia's international trade by volume moves by sea, making us one of the largest shipping nations in the world. For Australia, international law is not an abstract diplomatic principle but the practical framework that secures freedom of navigation and protects our export routes and GDP. Any strategy for national resilience that neglects this legal architecture in favour of military deterrence alone we believe misunderstands the true foundation of Australian security.

This dependence is relevant to current debates about sovereign capability and the onshoring of critical industries. It is unrealistic and not in Australia's interest for the nation ever to become fully self-sufficient. Australia will remain a trading nation whose fuel, medicines, manufactured goods, and

export markets depend on secure sea lanes and cooperative international relationships, particularly in our region. National attention should therefore focus not only on building sovereign industrial capacity, but equally on maintaining the international laws, norms, and multilateral relationships that make it possible for Australia to trade, borrow, and travel as a maritime nation in the first place. Investment in one without the other leaves Australia only partially secure.

Defence and submarine capability form a legitimate part of this picture, but they are not a substitute for it. It is arguably more important for Australia to support and strengthen our region's collective commitment to international law: to the non-proliferation regime, to the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes, to freedom of navigation norms, and to the multilateral institutions, from ASEAN-centred architecture to the Pacific Islands Forum, that allow smaller and larger states alike to resolve disputes without resorting to force. A rules-based order will make us more secure and for longer than AUKUS ever could.

AUKUS risks undermining this objective. It works against global non-proliferation trends at precisely the moment Australia should be strengthening them, placing the credibility of our stated commitment to a nuclear-weapon-free world in question. It places disproportionate emphasis on a single, distant, hard-power military alliance, at the expense of the sustained diplomatic and institutional investment needed to keep the region's own rules-based order intact. And by absorbing an extraordinary share of national resources and policy attention over the coming decades, AUKUS risks crowding out the more modest but far more cost-effective investments in international law, regional diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation that have historically done the most to keep Australia's trade routes open and its region peaceful.

Australia, as a middle power with a strong partisan approach to global alliances, is easily caught in great power conflicts that leave us dangerously exposed. Take the fact that AUKUS will place Australia in an untenable position vis-à-vis our obligations under international law. Australia, unlike the United States, is a signatory to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. If Australian military personnel are on a sub, aircraft or other vessel when war crimes are committed, Australian personnel could well be subject to ICC arrest warrants.

A national strategy genuinely oriented towards long-term security would treat the maintenance of that legal and diplomatic order as a first-order priority; not as an afterthought to be funded, if at all, from what remains once AUKUS's costs have been met.

AUKUS in the Classroom

AUKUS's reach now extends well beyond military build-up and defence and into education, where defence industry priorities are, disturbingly, being embedded into the education of our younger generation. The Commonwealth has committed \$128 million to fund more than 4,000 additional STEM places across 16 universities specifically to grow the workforce for the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine pathway. In addition, the Australian Submarine Agency's Propel program offers up to 3,000 scholarships to STEM students, pairing financial support with mentoring from figures in the defence and engineering sectors. Universities have embraced this growing militarisation of curricula, with the Group of Eight pledging to redesign curricula and establish new defence institutes to "turbocharge" AUKUS Pillar II.

This trend is of direct concern to the Sydney Peace Foundation, as an organisation committed to peace education and to nurturing a new generation of peacebuilders. Embedding militarised career pathways into education, and directly sponsoring high-school and university-aged students into defence careers, will have a chilling impact on students' capacity for critical thinking and ability to frame solutions around peace, conflict and security.

Australia should focus on building the intercultural and regional knowledge, relationships, and partnerships that connect us with the cultures of Asia and the Pacific. We must also rebuild our capacity for conflict resolution, dialogue, and relationship-building, particularly at a time of growing geopolitical, social, technological, and environmental insecurity. This requires a significant increase in funding for DFAT, an expanded diplomatic footprint, and active participation in international forums such as the UN Peacebuilding Commission, alongside greater investment in regional aid, development, joint education, and economic cooperation.

Recommendations

Dialogue and Diplomacy as the More Effective Path to Peace and Security: The Government should commission an independent assessment of AUKUS's impact on Australia's relationships with Southeast Asian and Pacific partners, conducted in direct consultation with those governments and civil society. Such a negotiated, dialogue-based approach to regional security would better protect Australia than a purely military build-up.

Economic and Opportunity Costs: Treasury should be directed to publish a full, inflation-adjusted costing of AUKUS over its full life, together with a transparent comparison against Australia's unmet domestic needs – investments in health, education, energy transition, protection of our environment and closing the gap that are critical to a safer, more resilient, more independent, and more prosperous future for Australia and our region.

Indigenous Sovereignty and the Rights of Traditional Owners: Every relevant decision must be made in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We recommend that all defence and infrastructure projects of this kind be suspended until traditional owners have given their consent.

Independent non-proliferation and international law assessment: An independent assessment should examine AUKUS's implications for Australia's obligations under the TPNW, the Treaty of Rarotonga, and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

References

Department of Defence (Cth), *Additional University Places to Grow Australia's AUKUS Workforce* (Media Release, 29 November 2023) <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2023-11-29/additional-university-places-grow-australias-aukus-workforce>.

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Cth), *Australia in the World: 2025 Snapshot* (Publication, 2025) <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/international-relations/australia-world-2025-snapshot>.

Department of Defence (Cth), *STEM Scholarships to Propel Nuclear Submarine Program* (Media Release, 24 March 2026) <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2026-03-24/stem-scholarships-propel-nuclear-submarine-program>.

Pacific Regional Non-Governmental Organisations (PRNGO) Alliance, *Pacific Civil Society Calls for a Genuine Ocean of Peace: The Pacific Is Not a Battleground* (Media Statement, Pacific Network on Globalisation, 13 July 2026) <https://pang.org.fj/pacific-civil-society-calls-for-a-genuine-ocean-of-peace-the-pacific-is-not-a-battleground/>.

Lipi Shetty, "Nuclear Ban Treaty Crosses Majority Threshold" (News Brief), *Arms Control Today* (Arms Control Association, November 2025) <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-11/news-briefs/nuclear-ban-treaty-crosses-majority-threshold>.

The Australia Institute, *Two-thirds of Australians Want a Review of AUKUS, While Less Than Half Think It Will Make Us Safer* (Media Release, 14 July 2025) <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/two-thirds-of-australians-want-a-review-of-aukus-while-less-than-half-think-it-will-make-us-safer-poll/>.

Peter Cronau, "Targeting Palestine", *Declassified Australia* (3 November 2023) <https://declassifiedaus.org/2023/11/03/targeting-palestine/>.