

What does AUKUS Mean for Taiwan?

November 7 2024



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Since the [announcement](#) of the AUKUS security partnership in September 2021, none of the three AUKUS partners – Australia, the UK and the US – have mentioned Taiwan as having any relevance to the aims of the partnership or that the nuclear-powered submarines to be acquired by Australia under Pillar 1 of the agreement might play any role in the defence of the island in their official public statements.

A linkage, however, between the proposed Australian nuclear-powered submarines and the defence of Taiwan, was made by US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell in April 2024 during [remarks](#) at the Washington-based Center for a New American Security, [indicating](#) an expectation the submarines would play a role in the US' defence strategy for Taiwan.

Taiwan has taken an interest in the AUKUS agreement. The author in discussions in 2023 and 2024 with a range of senior Taiwanese defence and foreign affairs officials and analysts from Taipei-based think tanks found that there was a broad consensus in Taiwan which welcomed the development of AUKUS but which at the same time saw potential long-term delays and obstacles that could limit AUKUS' immediate relevance to Taiwan.¹ Taiwanese defence and foreign affairs officials acknowledged that nuclear-powered submarine element of AUKUS was many years away from fruition and that Australia would not be in a position to provide submarine defence for Taiwan in the foreseeable future. However, they saw potential value in Pillar 2 of AUKUS, involving the sharing of defence technology including missiles, cyber and other weapons, and the partnership more broadly as being a means to commit Australia to support the US in the defence of Taiwan in the future.

A number of US military officers have [nominated](#) 2027 as a likely timing for a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Lisa Franchetti, the highest ranking officer in the US Navy, [released](#) a new Navigation Plan on September 18 2024, which focused predominantly on readiness for war with the People's Republic of China (PRC) over Taiwan by 2027.

Taiwanese analysts are of the view that as Australia will not have the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines within its arsenal by 2027, the Australian contribution to any defence of Taiwan would not be particularly significant. They have asserted that what the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) or the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) could currently do to assist Taiwan directly in the event of conflict is limited. The only role that Australia could play in the short to medium-term would be to support major US actions in support of Taiwan by incorporating Australian forces into US strike groups or taskforces.

¹ This article is informed by interviews with senior officials from Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of National Defense and analysts from the Institute for National Defense and Security Research conducted in Taipei in June 2023, September 2023 and January 2024. Interviewees requested anonymity. All references to observations from Taiwanese officials and analysts throughout this article originate from these interviews.

To this end, the [access](#) that Australia has provided to US forces at bases in northern and western Australia could play a role in supporting US action in defence of Taiwan, alongside the Pine Gap and Northwest Cape intelligence facilities.

Senior Taiwanese officials noted that in the recent past Australia has strongly supported US military actions politically but have not initially taken a prominent role in the fighting as was demonstrated by the 2003 invasion of Iraq. These officials are of the opinion that in the event of conflict in the Taiwan Strait some RAN and RAAF assets could be integrated into a US taskforce but given the potentially short timeframe of the conflict, Australian ground forces would be unlikely to play a prominent role in a conflict with the PRC.

In the view of Taiwanese officials and analysts, it is the US-Australia defence link that is most useful to Taiwan and its defence. In general, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) does not directly engage with the Republic of China (ROC) military. For example, the Taiwan Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in Australia has no contact with the Department of Defence in Canberra or the ADF and Australia-Taiwan military-to-military exchanges are limited, although there is a mid-level civilian defence official posted to the Australian Office in Taipei who liaises with the Taiwan military in Taipei.

Taiwanese analysts see the most significant impact of AUKUS in the short run to be Pillar 2 of the agreement. There is widespread [interest](#) in Taiwan to gain access to some of the Pillar 2 defence technologies.

There have been no announcements of Taiwan's potential participation in Pillar 2 but given the US commitment under Biden to [supply](#) Taiwan with advanced weapons, Taiwanese officials believe is possible that the US could bring Taiwan into this fold.

Taipei supports RAN and RAAF activity in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait but Taiwanese officials indicated that Taiwan has concerns about Australia entering Taiwan Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) without notification. Indeed, Taipei has indicated its displeasure of the RAN [transiting](#) the waters of the Taiwan EEZ and conducting exercises there without notification.

Despite US military statements asserting a likely PRC invasion of Taiwan in 2027, at various levels of government and in think tanks in Taiwan there is significant doubt about the likelihood of a direct attack on Taiwan by this nominated time. They suggest that political-military harassment and PRC grey zone activity is more likely than an attack or blockade of the island in the coming years.

There are major riders on any Australian participation in a Taiwan Strait conflict, in the view of Taiwanese officials and analysts. They lay out are four possible scenarios which in their perspective would make Australian military participation in the defence of Taiwan unlikely:

1. Despite US assertions of the possibility of People's Liberation Army (PLA) attack on Taiwan in 2027, there is no certainty of an outright attack. Rather, the PLA will maintain the current political-military activity and pressure on Taiwan indefinitely to achieve potential goals of isolating Taiwan and limiting its diplomatic space.
2. In addition to political-military pressure Beijing is expected to utilise grey zone activity against Taiwan involving cyber, maritime harassment and political attacks rather than invasion or blockade.
3. In Taiwan, there is divided opinion on whether, despite US President Joe Biden's [promises](#) to defend Taiwan in the event of a PRC attack that the US can be relied upon to come to the defence of Taiwan. Some Taiwanese analysts described Biden's statements as rhetorical deterrence as opposed to a confirmed military commitment.
4. Finally, the question of a US-PRC military conflict over Taiwan is put in doubt by the fact that both the US and China are nuclear-armed countries – that a conflict could easily spiral up the nuclear escalation ladder potentially acts as a brake on both sides going to war.

The AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines, if available, would be redundant in each of these circumstances.

Taiwan welcomes AUKUS in principle but views Pillar 1 as unlikely to be practically useful to defend Taiwan in the foreseeable future given the length of time it will take for the Australian nuclear-powered submarines to come online. Taiwan will continue to look to potential participation in the Pillar 2 of AUKUS technology but solely through its connections with the US.

More broadly, there continuing doubts in both [Australia](#) and Taiwan about the long-term future of AUKUS and whether nuclear-powered submarines will ever be able to come to the defence of Taiwan. The recent re-election of Donald Trump as US president will also cause some concern in Taipei. Trump's support for Taiwan has been uncertain, with the president-elect having recently questioned Taiwan's role as a key producer of semiconductors and [accused](#) Taiwan of stealing US chip technology.

A Trump administration adds an extra layer of doubt on the future of AUKUS, a Biden administration initiative. During his first term as US president (2017-2021) Trump [overturned](#) many decisions of the previous Obama administration. There is a chance he may reject AUKUS because it is a Biden administration program or seek its redesign with greater financial input from Australia and the UK. Only time will tell.

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During his career with DFAT, among other jobs Mr Magee headed up the areas dealing with both China and with Russia. He also led the Taskforce that established the National Foundation for Australia China Relations and was the interim CEO of that organisation.

He holds B.A. (Hons) and LLB degrees from Monash University and was recognised by Monash University in 2011 as a Monash University Distinguished Alumni. In 2013, he was recognised by the Taipei Language Institute as a TLI Outstanding Alumni. In 1992, he was appointed a United Nations Fellow and spent half a year based in Geneva and New York.