

AUKUS INQUIRY SUBMISSION

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AUKUS should be scrapped. There are better ways to manage national security that will contribute to building the economy and strengthening relations with neighbouring countries. Calling on my extended career when I was working in both government and private sectors on aspects of Australia-China relations, I argue for an alternative strategic and diplomatic framework that would redefine Australia's international position. In doing so, I am not distinguishing between the various AUKUS Pillars. AUKUS is aimed at countering China's military power. It reinforces the view that China is aggressive and hostile, but this is not true.

A personal perspective

I have worked in academia, government and business on various aspects of Australia-China relations for more than half a century. Despite practical difficulties and sometimes a hostile environment, it has been very rewarding. As the first Cultural Counsellor at the Australian Embassy in Beijing 1975-78, the first Executive Director of the Australia China Council (now the National Foundation for Australia China Relations) 1979-85, and the first female Senior Trade Commissioner for China 1985-88, I promoted Australian culture and Australian goods and services. Generally, since China was going through a prolonged phase of emergence and engagement with the western world, my work was welcome, but there was always an emotional gap, since I identified with my government and my country and engaged with partners who were similarly committed to theirs.

Then from 1988 to 1992 I worked for the International Wool Secretariat, the international arm of the Australian Wool Corporation, with a brief to open the market for Australian wool. The approach I and my colleagues took was quite different. We formed partnerships with Chinese manufacturers, designers, retailers and traders to produce and promote high-quality wool products, made in China and bearing the internationally recognised Woolmark logo, indicating that they contained fine wool from Australia and other IWS member countries and conformed with international technical standards. In this work the two sides shared a common goal and worked cooperatively. There were of course cultural, technical and political differences to be overcome, but this approach did build understanding and trust. It was rewarding for all concerned and I regard this period as the highlight of my career.

I believe that this approach can be applied more generally in Australia China relations. Hostility provokes suspicion and doubt. Focus on matters of common concern and joint work to resolve differences dispels misunderstanding and fosters trust.

Australia-China relations

In the last years of the government of Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Communist Party of China, Australia was a pioneer in opening dialogue and exchanges with China, which at that time was still poor and isolated. This relationship continued through the 1970s, when the Australian government established the Australia China Council to advise and assist with the expansion of ties at all levels of society. Firm personal friendships and institutional partnerships were started, and many continue to this day. In the 1980s, the period that China calls “Reform and Opening Up”, Australia backed economic reforms and brought China into APEC and the World Trade Organisation. China’s growth drove investment and trade in minerals in this country. Chinese tourists, students and business owners came. Some stayed permanently. The visible increase in the local ethnic Chinese community provoked loudmouths like Pauline Hanson to warn of the country being “swamped by Asians”. Perversely, just when Australia’s economy was becoming enmeshed with that of China, public opinion wavered. The first decade of this century was something of a “Last Hurrah” of government initiatives to promote closer relations with China, with the Australian pavilion at the World Trade Expo in Shanghai in 2010 and Year of Australia in China 2010-11. In 2014 the two countries signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, indicating deep mutual commitment.

Over the same period, China’s view of Australia shifted from cautious political recognition to deep economic partnership. One measure of the strong trust established in the first 20 years of diplomatic engagement is that China’s first major foreign equity investment was in Australia. As Senior Trade Commissioner in the 1980s, under Ambassador Ross Garnaut, I was deeply involved in the negotiations of the Mount Channar iron ore mine joint venture signed in 1987 between Hamersley Iron (a subsidiary of Rio Tinto) and China’s state-owned Sinosteel.

On the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations in 2012, “normal” relations were being maintained through regular high-level visits, while grassroots people-to-people links continued to flourish. Trust and confidence in the relationship were both evident. A Treasury paper of that date predicted that trade and bilateral relations would continue to grow, although registering some scepticism whether China’s domestic economic growth could maintain its momentum – scepticism subsequently proved unnecessary.

From 2017 onwards there was growing anxiety in this country regarding Australian national sovereignty. Political meddling cooled goodwill. Foreign Interference laws were passed in 2017. Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei was banned from participation in the Australian 5G

network in 2018. Beijing's view of Australia soured in the 2010s, following these and other actions that were viewed as unfriendly. Several Chinese commentators noted that Canberra was increasingly toeing the American line. Further investigation may well show that they were correct.

It is certain that in Canberra, from this time onwards, there was general "securitisation" of international relations, notably directed towards China. Clive Hamilton's 2018 book *Silent invasion: China's influence in Australia* marked the emergence of a new pervasive anti-China line that appealed to the media. In 2020, Prime Minister Scott Morrison called publicly for an investigation into the origins of Covid. China reacted by imposing tariffs on a range of Australian exports. Some who had cause to resent Chinese government restrictions on press freedoms easily preferred negative assessments of Beijing's policies. The withdrawal of press representatives during the Covid lock-down had the side effect of limiting information exchange. AUKUS was announced by Morrison in 2021. The peak of anti-China sentiment was the 2023 *Red Alert* series of reports published by the Nine newspapers. The opening sentences read, "Are we prepared for war? The public has a right to know."

The background and evolution of AUKUS

In this fervent anti-China environment, AUKUS was dreamt up by the Morrison government and was never properly debated in parliament or explained the public. The key element of AUKUS is the acquisition of nuclear submarines or Pillar One. Such vessels are not suited to the defence of Australian territory or our close neighbours. In the Pacific region, the deployment of nuclear ships would also contravene the terms of the 1985 Rarotonga Treaty that safeguards a Pacific nuclear-free zone. Nuclear submarines are attack vessels that can operate at long distance, and although the specific "enemy" to be attacked is not named, it is obviously the People's Republic of China.

The US government has beaten up the "China threat" since 2015 when, throughout his first election campaign, Donald Trump harped on "Chyyna" being a hostile power. He accused China of raping the American economy. This casting of the US as the underdog undoubtedly helped him to win the election, and this anti-China theme has persisted in Washington discourse ever since. Under Trump, China was accused of deliberately spreading Covid and of attempting to sabotage American institutions.

There is slim evidence of China openly or secretly attempting to subvert the US. Rather, since it has emerged as an international economic power, Beijing has upheld international laws and conventions and has played a responsible part in international forums. President Xi Jinping has made it clear that China expects to be treated by others with respect, and that it will defend its interests within the framework of international law. Historically, China has not been an

expansionist power, and its foreign policy is based on the principles enunciated in Bandung in the 1960s.

The US is no longer the only superpower in the Asia-Pacific region, but it maintains many military bases from the Philippines to Korea and engages in regular exercises and FONOPs that are clearly designed to restrict Chinese activities. The question of Taiwan's status with regard to mainland China and its relationship with the US is the most critical potential flashpoint. In the past the US, and Australia, have maintained "strategic ambiguity" regarding Taiwan, hoping to preserve the status quo while declining to state whether it would intervene in the case of a mainland attack on the island. Under the Trump administration, it is hard to predict how this policy might change in the future but the fact that Washington is now preparing to host a visit by Xi Jinping in September suggests there will not be any shift.

The Australian defence establishment maintains close relations with the US. From 2015 on, defence and security institutions such as ASPI quickly picked up the line being pushed by the Pentagon. Simultaneously, in Canberra, under the Morrison government, the defence establishment and the Department of Home Affairs grew in stature and became more influential.

Why did the Labor government, when elected in 2022, not pause or question the AUKUS commitment, which was entered into by the previous Liberal coalition? The only rationale advanced at the time was that Labor traditionally supports strong ties with the US. Clearly Labor also wanted to avoid national security being used as a wedge in the election campaign. At no time since then has there been an opportunity for the public to hear a clear debate on this issue or to offer views and alternatives. At the Labor Party national conference in July this year, AUKUS was "mostly buffed away", to quote Jacob Gruber of the ABC.

CBMs not ICBMs

Working together towards a common goal is the best way to deepen understanding and build trust. This is a truism in international as well as personal relationships. In the case of Australia-China relations, I call on my own experience as evidence that this approach works.

For Australia, stabilising and securing long-term relations with China is more vital now than it was in the 1990s. Recent events have shown how fragile bilateral trust is and how much we need to rebuild confidence, and there would seem no better place to start than in our own Pacific neighbourhood. China's recent missile test in the Pacific did not win friendship. [Penny Wong called](#) the test and the recent clash between China and the Philippines navy "destabilizing and risky".

I suggest that both sides need CBMs (confidence-building measures) not ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles). Confidence-building measures (CBMs) are designed to signal

goodwill, enhance transparency, and reduce the risk of accidental escalation. Starting from a basis of zero or minimal trust, they can be stepping-stones in conflict resolution. They help build predictable, working relationships as each side gets to understand the other's perspectives and ambitions and make adjustments in their own thinking.

Simon Mason and Matthias Siegfried of Swisspeace and the Swiss Centre for Security Studies, experts in mediation and conflict resolution, have [identified four steps in confidence building](#):

- Communication: Creating secure, trusted channels—such as direct hotlines or designated points of contact—to prevent misinterpretation during crises.
- Transparency: Voluntarily sharing information regarding military movements, capabilities, or political intentions to eliminate surprise and reduce suspicion.
- Verification: Using international observers, joint monitoring, or reciprocal inspections to ensure commitments are upheld.
- Constraint: Implementing mutual agreements to limit power demonstrations, such as pausing military exercises in contested zones or restricting certain armaments.

There seems no reason why all these steps cannot be immediately implemented between Australia and China.

History provides many examples of CBMs' ability to decrease tension and prevent hostility. In the Cold War period, the 1975 Helsinki Final Act paved the way for landmark arms control. More recently, India and Pakistan established military hotlines and provided mutual notifications of exercises to prevent conventional clashes from spiraling out of control. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's 1977 visit to Jerusalem was a psychological confidence-building measure that ultimately led to the Camp David Accords.

Extending beyond projects at the industrial and professional level, national jointly designed and administered cooperative projects can lead to a "peace spiral" steadily building trust. China and Australia already collaborate in science research and innovation. A [recent study](#) by the Australia China Relations Institute at UTS Sydney demonstrated that the risk of collaboration with China is smaller than the cost of curbing it. The Walter and Eliza Hall Institute partner with Chinese counterparts to develop biomedical solutions for global health challenges. The Australia-China Science and Research Fund supports several joint research centres in areas such as medical technology and advanced manufacturing. The National Foundation for Australia-China Relations in its most recent programs has funded bilateral cooperation in renewable energy including photovoltaic technology.

The two countries have in the past worked together internationally. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Development Cooperation with China in 2013 and has renewed it since then. The Australia-China-Papua New Guinea Trilateral Collaboration on Malaria Control extended over several years, concluding in 2024, and is acknowledged to have achieved significant health outcomes. Other collaborative work has taken place under UN auspices. Australia and China in the past have collaborated in peacekeeping in several African conflict zones.

In our own region, there is surely much to be gained from working together, for the benefit of Pacific neighbours as well as for ourselves. Jon Barnett, Mark Wang and Tearinaki Tanielu of the University of Melbourne [have urged](#) both countries to cooperate in the Pacific on many pressing issues, including measures to combat climate change, where many Island nations are on the front line.

Following a meeting between Penny Wong and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Manila on 21 July, [Wang expressed](#) the hope that Australia will work with China to safeguard the improving trajectory of their relations. She noted that China is ready to enhance exchanges with Australia, build up mutual trust, expand cooperation, and work for continued new progress in bilateral ties.

Let's scrap AUKUS

AUKUS locks Australia into the US military structure and makes it almost inevitable that Australian forces would join the US in actions that they initiated whether these would be to Australia's benefit. Scrapping such an alliance would allow Australia to develop strategic initiatives to safeguard our own national interests rather than those of the US. It would allow us to rebuild a relationship with China based on trust and mutual respect, to the benefit of both countries.

(This submission draws extensively from my article *China and Australia cooperation: Is it too much to ask?* published in *Pearls and Irritations* on 28 July 2026.)