

# BLACK SWAN

## STRATEGY PAPER

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### THE STRATEGIC RATIONALE FOR SUBMARINE ROTATIONAL FORCES WEST: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE ALLIANCE

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DEFENCE AND SECURITY THROUGH AN INDO-PACIFIC LENS



## Black Swan Strategy Paper #15

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### Front Cover Image:

(L-R) Captain Jason Pittman USN, Commodore Glen Miles RAN, and Captain Shaun Southwood RN, await Virginia-class submarine USS Minnesota to come alongside Fleet Base West in Western Australia.

↓ Virginia-class fast-attack submarine USS Hawaii arrives alongside Fleet Base West, HMAS Stirling, Western Australia.



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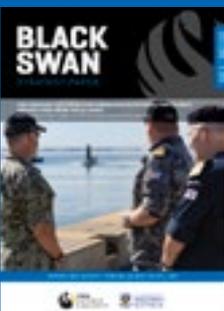


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## About the Black Swan Strategy Papers

The *Black Swan Strategy Papers* are the flagship publication of the UWA Defence and Security Institute (DSI). They represent the intersection between Western Australia and strategic studies – both of which are famous for their black swans. The series aims to provide high-quality analysis and strategic insights into the Indo-Pacific region through a defence and security lens, with the hope of reducing the number of 'black swan' events with which Australian strategy and Indo-Pacific security has to contend. Each of the Black Swan Strategy Papers are generally between 5,000 and 15,000 words and are written for a policy-oriented audience. The Black Swan Strategy Papers are commission works by the UWA DSI by invitation only.

↓ United States Navy Virginia-class submarine USS Minnesota alongside Fleet Base West in Western Australia.



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## Executive Summary

**This Black Swan Strategy Paper situates Submarine Rotational Forces West (SRF-West) within a rapidly evolving regional security environment marked by China's expanding naval reach and growing ability to operate further from its home waters.**

The People's Liberation Army Navy's recent surface deployments near Australia help to underscore the strategic significance of Australia's western approaches and, along with the strategic geography outlined in Australia's Defence Strategic Review (DSR), reinforce the rationale for a persistent allied undersea presence in the region. Against this backdrop, SRF-West is assessed as an enabler of deterrence, interoperability, and operational resilience for Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Beyond its immediate military value, this strategy paper examines the broader strategic dividends of

SRF-West. For Australia, these include accelerating the Royal Australian Navy's pathway to a nuclear-powered submarine capability, deepening alliance integration, further securing US and UK commitment to the region, and encouraging industrial and workforce transformation in Western Australia. For the UK and the US, SRF-West enhances regional forward posture, strengthens military cohesion, and signals a shared willingness to uphold regional stability. SRF-West leverages an enduring geographic advantage to deliver near-term deterrence and long-term capability growth, positioning Australia as a hub of coalition undersea power in the Indo-Pacific.

## Policy Recommendations

- SRF-West and broader AUKUS Pillar One-related works at HMAS Stirling have progressed significantly; however, resolving the complex and thorny development issues at the Henderson precinct requires greater prioritisation by all stakeholders.
- The UK should ensure the long-term availability of an Astute-class SSN for SRF-West and take every opportunity to build closer ties with the RAN.
- All three countries need to talk more publicly about the value that AUKUS Phase 1 provides, alongside other posture changes in Australia, particularly in terms of access to Australian air bases.



# Introduction

## Geography has always been the bedrock of Australia's strategic significance.

In the Second World War, Fremantle became one of the largest allied submarine bases in the Pacific theatre, with over 160 American, British, and Dutch submarines using the Western Australian port as a springboard for missions into Southeast Asia and the South China Sea.<sup>1</sup> The location was close enough to interdict Japanese shipping in the contested waters to the north but far enough south to remain beyond the easy reach of Japanese airpower. This wartime precedent underscores a simple truth: geography remains a constant in strategy. Today, that enduring reality has returned to allied planning with the upcoming establishment of Submarine Rotational Force-West (SRF-West) at HMAS Stirling, just south of Perth. From 2027, this will place Western Australia once again as a crucial hub of coalition undersea power.

The importance of geography was underscored in February and March 2025 when a flotilla of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) warships conducted a near full circumnavigation of Australia. The task group comprising a *Type-055 Renhai-class* destroyer, a *Type-054A Jiangkai II-class* frigate, and a resupply ship passed down the east coast of Australia, across the south coast, and then north up along Western Australia's seaboard.<sup>2</sup> Although unlikely, some defence analysts assessed that this surface flotilla may well have been accompanied by a *Shang-class* or *Shang II-class* nuclear-powered attack submarine, highlighting China's growing ability to operate at a distance from its home waters.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the Virginia-class USS *Minnesota* (SSN-783) was alongside at HMAS Stirling, conducting the fourth AUKUS-specific SSN visit as part of preparations for SRF-West.<sup>4</sup> As the PLAN flotilla was operating 170 nautical miles (314 kilometres) south-southwest of Perth, the *Minnesota* put to sea in company with one of the Royal Australian Navy's Collins-class submarines and the air warfare destroyer HMAS *Hobart*.<sup>5</sup> Whilst they were evidently a substantial distance away from the PLAN task group, it was a demonstration of how relatively close these navies are operating off the south-west coast of Western Australia.

The decision to rotate one British and four American submarines at HMAS Stirling through SRF-West is, in many ways, a contemporary echo of Fremantle's historic role. Just as the port of Fremantle served as the staging ground for coalition submarine campaigns in the Pacific War, from 2027 SRF-West will form the southern base in a persistent allied undersea presence in the Indo-Pacific.

For the UK and the US, it expands the depth and resilience of their posture by creating a submarine hub that sits astride the Indian Ocean with a relatively modest transit to maritime Southeast Asia. For Australia, it delivers a set of strategic dividends that extend far beyond hosting allied port visits: SRF-West accelerates the Royal Australian Navy's pathway to a nuclear-powered submarine capability; reinforces deterrence against China's expanding naval presence; strengthens interoperability

with allies and partners; locks in American, and to a lesser extent British, strategic commitment to the region; and adds impetus to industrial and workforce transformation in Western Australia.

Australia's decision to host SRF-West represents the first tangible phase of AUKUS Pillar One, a partnership that represents the most consequential defence technology arrangement in Australian history. Yet there are hurdles to overcome. Infrastructure development, particularly at the Australian Marine Complex in Henderson, is proceeding. However, federal and state governments have yet to publicly release a clear schedule detailing how the facilities will scale to sustain rotational SSNs in the coming years. Domestic debates will also test the political durability of allied commitment in Washington, London, and Canberra. Still, the strategic rationale is clear: geography gives Western Australia an enduring comparative advantage, and SRF-West harnesses that advantage to deliver near-term deterrence and long-term capability growth.

SRF-West positions Australia not as a passive beneficiary of coalition power, but as an important southern hub in the evolving Indo-Pacific security order. Just as in 1944, when Fremantle served as a hub for coalition submarines in contested waters, today HMAS Stirling is emerging as a crucial piece of a trilateral effort to uphold regional stability and ensure the Indo-Pacific remains free and open.

## CHAPTER 1

# Australia: The Value of Strategic Geography

**Geography has long shaped Australia's strategic value to its allies. During the Second World War, Fremantle emerged as one of the largest allied submarine bases in the Pacific theatre.**

At its peak in 1944, more than 160 American, British, and Dutch submarines operated from Fremantle in Western Australia, undertaking missions across the archipelagic waters of Southeast Asia and into the South China Sea.<sup>6</sup> Its location offered unparalleled access to the Indian Ocean and through the maritime approaches of Southeast Asia, while remaining out of easy reach of Japanese airpower. This wartime precedent underlines a key point: geography is a constant in strategy. The decision to rotate nuclear-powered submarines at HMAS Stirling through Submarine Rotational Force-West is in many ways a contemporary

echo of Fremantle's historic strategic role.<sup>7</sup> Just as Fremantle served as a forward hub for allied submarine campaigns in the Pacific War, today SRF-West positions Western Australia at the fulcrum of coalition undersea deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.

Australia's decision to host US and UK submarines is not just symbolic. It represents the first concrete steps in realising AUKUS in its early phase, and a decisive step in locking Australia into one of the most consequential defence technology partnerships in its history.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, there remain many hurdles because Australia has yet to publicly release a detailed schedule for SRF-West related works,

particularly at Henderson, which would provide greater certainty around investment and planning for business and industry moving forward.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, a trilateral SRF-West master schedule that takes into account the myriad of interdependencies now existing between the three countries and links up the joint actions needed is also yet to be publicly available. However, for Australia, the benefits of SRF-West extend beyond access to allied submarines. It puts the RAN on the pathway to operating its own SSN capability, increases coalition undersea presence in the eastern Indian Ocean, bolsters operational and strategic deterrence against China, locks in regional allied commitment, and transforms economic and industrial drivers in Western Australia, thus strengthening Australia's overall position in the emerging Indo-Pacific order.



↑ 1945 - British submarines and depot ship HMS Adamant at North Wharf - Family of Saxon Fogarty

## Accelerating the Path to Operating an SSN Capability

A valuable benefit for Australia is the way SRF-West will accelerate the transition towards owning and operating its own nuclear-powered submarines. In his March 2023 statement to Australia's House of Representatives, Defence Minister Richard Marles said, "submarines have the capacity to remain submerged and deployed for months, making them incredibly hard to detect... [and as] a corollary of their speed, stealth and endurance, a nuclear-powered submarine puts the biggest possible question mark in the mind of any potential adversary."<sup>10</sup> Yet building such a capability from scratch is a multi-generational undertaking. The optimal pathway transitioning from SRF-West rotations to Virginia-class acquisitions, and eventually to co-developed SSN-AUKUS submarines, spans over three decades. SRF-West provides a crucial bridge during this period. The regular presence of USN and less regular RN nuclear-powered submarines at HMAS Stirling allows the RAN to gain familiarity with nuclear submarine operations, logistics, and sustainment long before it takes delivery of its own boats.

RAN personnel are already embedded with US and UK crews. SRF-West will significantly increase the level of Australian crew development in hands-on expertise in nuclear safety, reactor maintenance protocols, and the demanding standards of continuous at-sea deterrence.<sup>11</sup> In the second half of 2025, RAN personnel were aboard every US nuclear-powered attack submarine across the Indo-Pacific.<sup>12</sup> This process is essential for ensuring that Australia becomes not just a purchaser, but a sovereign operator of SSNs. Australia must demonstrate it can manage, sustain, and eventually command SSN submarines, and SRF-West provides the perfect proving ground for the RAN.<sup>13</sup> Without the operational apprenticeship that SRF-West provides, the pathway to independent Australian SSN operations would be significantly riskier and slower. Thus, the rotational force is not an adjunct, it is an indispensable mechanism for capability transfer. It accelerates Australia's march toward nuclear submarine sovereignty, embedding operational knowledge within the RAN and the Australian defence industrial base years earlier than would otherwise have been possible.



↑ United States Navy and Royal Australian Navy sailors work together onboard USS Hawaii during the Submarine Tender Maintenance Period at HMAS Stirling in Western Australia.

## Expanding Allied Naval Presence and Reinforcing Deterrence

The extension of US and UK undersea presence into the eastern Indian Ocean represents a strategic gain for Australia, a region of mounting strategic importance. It is reasonably likely that the South China Sea will remain an area of focus for SRF-West rotationally based submarines to patrol, so they will regularly transit the northeast Indian Ocean. The 2023 DSR explicitly identifies the northeast Indian Ocean as a core part of "the primary area of military interest."<sup>14</sup> This area represents a maritime crossroads for global energy and trade flows, and as a theatre where China is beginning to expand its naval presence. United States force posture in the Indian Ocean has historically been relatively thin, with the bulk of US naval power concentrated in the Western Pacific and the Persian Gulf.<sup>15</sup> In recent years, the Indian Ocean has become more contested due to increased PLAN activity; however, the US has lacked a sustained presence to reassure partners and better deter adversaries.

With the basing of rotational SSNs at HMAS Stirling, coalition submarines gain quicker and more persistent access to the eastern Indian Ocean, including the monitoring of vital chokepoints such as the Malacca, Lombok and Sunda Straits. More transits and patrols in this theatre help to offset gaps in US posture and align allied operations within

Australia's geographic priority areas.<sup>16</sup> For Australia, this is a force multiplier. It means one of the regions of greatest concern to Canberra will now see an expanded allied presence that directly responds to those concerns and contributes to regional deterrence. Along with other US force posture initiatives, SRF-West thus anchors allied power in a region where Australia cannot act alone but still has vital national interests. It ensures that the RAN's limited submarine fleet is reinforced by allied assets operating from Australian waters, particularly in the short term as Australia begins to transition from the diesel-electric powered Collins-class, giving strategic weight to Australia's stated priority of securing the northeast Indian Ocean.

Having US and UK SSNs operate from Western Australia also significantly increases the credibility of allied deterrence against PLAN coercion in the Indo-Pacific. Nuclear-powered submarines, with their stealth, range, and survivability, are among the most effective deterrent assets available in an operational sense and also provide strategic deterrence by potentially shaping the behaviour of adversaries.<sup>17</sup> For Australia, this deterrent effect aligns with its overarching strategic aim, which is to be part of an allied coalition that prevents any single power from achieving regional hegemony. AUKUS represents not just an SSN procurement strategy but a shift in Australia's alliance posture, signalling Canberra's commitment to high-end deterrence as part of a broader coalition strategy.<sup>18</sup>

SRF-West bolsters deterrence in three ways: first, it significantly shortens timelines. Although the arrival of Australian-operated SSNs is expected in the early 2030s, allied submarines at HMAS Stirling deliver immediate high-end undersea warfare capability in Australia's immediate region. Second, it addresses capability gaps. With the Collins-class fleet ageing and future SSNs not yet in service, allied rotations can fill a capability gap in Australia's crewed undersea availability. Third, it sends a powerful strategic message to adversaries, who must reckon with the fact that Australia hosts, and could support, allied SSN operations directly from its shores. This echoes Fremantle's wartime role, whereby Australia once again becomes a staging point for coalition undersea power.<sup>19</sup>

### Locking in Strategic Commitment and Boosting Benefits for Western Australia

The standing-up of SRF-West, in addition to the US's other regional bases and other force posture initiatives in Australia, further locks in the US's strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific. For decades, Australian policymakers have worried about the durability of Washington's regional engagement. Hosting US forward-deployed submarines in Australia addresses that concern by tying allied interests physically and operationally to Australia.<sup>20</sup> Infrastructure projects are already underway in Western Australia to support rotational visits, including expanded wharfage, maintenance facilities, and housing for allied personnel.<sup>21</sup> However, there is still much to do in the lead-up to SRF-West and in the years that follow. Australia is yet to publicly release a detailed schedule for SRF-West related works at both Henderson and HMAS Stirling<sup>22</sup>, and a trilateral SRF-West master schedule that takes into account the deepening of interdependencies is also yet to be made publicly available. Whilst many infrastructure hurdles are still to be overcome at both Henderson and HMAS Stirling, such as greater island access, new roads, marine infrastructure, site upgrades, and SRF-West related infrastructure, including contingency docking capabilities and depot-level maintenance facilities, these investments represent sunk costs that deepen the structural interdependence of the alliance.

Once established, SRF-West creates an increased US footprint, which will be incrementally more difficult for future US administrations to disengage from the region when assets, personnel, and families are more firmly embedded in Australia. The same is true for the UK commitment, albeit on a smaller scale. London's decision to forward-base an Astute-class submarine through SRF-West is significant for the Royal Navy, ensuring Britain's Indo-Pacific 'tilt' is not just rhetoric but operationalised on a rotational basis.<sup>23</sup> For Australia, this dual anchoring of commitment ensures that both powers are tied more firmly into the region's security architecture. In practical terms, this strengthens coalition interoperability, builds confidence among other regional partners, and signals to potential adversaries that the US-led alliance system has a durable southern hub. For Canberra, the payoff is a greater degree of strategic insurance, as SRF-West reduces the risk of US retrenchment and further secures a US presence in Australia's immediate region.

Along with the well-established mining industry, hosting SRF-West is a bonus for economic, industrial, and workforce development in Western Australia, particularly around HMAS Stirling and the Henderson precinct. As the Australian Department of Defence notes, the SRF-West Infrastructure Project is among the largest defence

construction efforts ever undertaken in WA.<sup>24</sup> The development of advanced maintenance facilities at Henderson is crucial. Not only will this allow sustainment of allied SSNs, but it also provides tangible strategic benefits to the US, helping to more favourably frame AUKUS domestically in Washington by demonstrating immediate returns.<sup>25</sup> For Australia, it increases the development of a defence industrial ecosystem in WA, creating jobs, upskilling workers in nuclear engineering, and embedding advanced maintenance and sustainment knowledge.

This industrial uplift is directly tied to Australia's future ambitions to operate nuclear-powered submarines. By building the skills and infrastructure to support visiting SSNs, Australia lays the groundwork for sustaining its own SSNs into the future.<sup>26</sup> It also increases RAN personnel familiarity with high-end submarine operations, ensuring a smoother transition when Australian-operated SSNs arrive. Finally, the local economic dividends help shore up political support for AUKUS. Perth's reawakening as a regional submarine hub echoes its WWII role, but with modern industrial significance.<sup>27</sup> By linking AUKUS to local jobs and infrastructure, SRF-West reinforces the alliance not only strategically but also politically and economically, underpinning support in a state critical to Australia's defence posture.



↑ USS Vermont Maintenance Period

## CHAPTER 2

# United Kingdom: Binding the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific

**SRF-West is a significant marker of the UK's commitment to playing an influential and active role in building and maintaining the security of the Indo-Pacific.**

Despite a core focus on the Euro-Atlantic, the UK has increasingly recognised the importance of the Indo-Pacific for its own security, starting with its 'tilt' towards the region in the 2021 Integrated Review and maintained throughout subsequent reviews despite the deep importance of the Euro-Atlantic theatre. The rise of China and its increasingly assertive posture in the South China Sea cannot be ignored by the UK, and the AUKUS deal was born of the recognition that stronger security partnerships to bind the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific together will be of vital importance to British interests.

The technology side of the AUKUS deal has particular benefits for the UK, both for its own military capabilities and for the domestic defence-industrial base. The development of the SSN-AUKUS involves sharing state-of-the-art American nuclear propulsion technology, which will be included in the final design. The British submarines will be built in the UK, providing considerable security for the future of the submarine industry – a substantial pipeline of orders for the new SSN will give British construction facilities and their supply chains work for years to come. The additional technology cooperation and collaboration born of Pillar Two will further enhance Britain's military capabilities and boost innovation in a whole host of critical areas.

Diplomatically, AUKUS strengthens the UK's ties with important allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region and further signals its commitment to contributing to the collective security architecture in an uncertain time.



↑ British Submarines Tapir and Turpin at NQ C1944: The family of Saxon Fogarty (via Fremantle Ports)

As well as the obvious trilateral relationship, a successful AUKUS deal is likely to be well received by other regional states that share the trio's concerns about stability and the balance of power vis-à-vis the PRC. The agreement provides a platform for the UK to strengthen its bilateral relationships with these important regional partners and to engage more deeply with regional multilateral institutions and forums, such as ASEAN.

SRF-West, which will include a British Astute-class SSN, reinforces and builds upon the UK's commitments to the Indo-Pacific, supplementing other naval activities in the region while also contributing to the deterrence of China. This task is firmly within British strategic goals.

### Indo-Pacific Tilt

Over the past decade, successive British defence reviews have underscored the paramount importance of sea power in addressing contemporary security challenges and sustaining the UK's global influence.<sup>28</sup> These strategic documents reflect a recalibration of national defence policy in response to shifting geopolitical dynamics, emerging threats, and the need to preserve maritime superiority. The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review<sup>29</sup> marked a critical juncture in this evolution, emphasising the necessity of a robust and adaptable Royal Navy capable of responding to an increasingly complex security environment. The review advocated maintaining a balanced maritime force to reinforce the UK's ability to project power globally.

The 2021 Integrated Review further reinforced maritime strategy as a cornerstone of the UK's defence posture.<sup>30</sup> This document articulated a vision for "Global Britain", underscoring the Royal Navy's pivotal role in enhancing national security and international engagement. While reaffirming the centrality of the Euro-Atlantic region to British strategic interests, the review also highlighted the necessity of an expanded presence in the Indo-Pacific. This policy shift, commonly referred to as the "Indo-Pacific tilt," demonstrated a strategic acknowledgment of emerging maritime challenges, particularly the escalating tensions in the South China Sea and the imperative of securing critical trade routes. The deployment of the Carrier Strike Group (CSG21) later that year served as a tangible manifestation of the UK's strategic intent, showcasing its ability to project cutting-edge military power in support of NATO and international maritime security. The 2023 Integrated Review Refresh<sup>31</sup> further acknowledged the increasing volatility of the global security environment and reaffirmed the UK's commitment to fostering a resilient and strategically agile defence posture.

The document emphasised the necessity of a Britain capable of "detering, defending, and competing" across all domains of conflict. The Carrier Strike Group deployment in 2025 and the new government's Strategic Defence Review<sup>32</sup> that same year further cemented these commitments.

The UK's recent defence reviews have also highlighted the significance of international partnerships in reinforcing maritime security. The increasing complexity of maritime threats necessitates multinational collaboration, particularly in naval exercises, intelligence sharing, and strategic deterrence. British participation in multinational naval operations serves as a testament to this commitment. These cooperative efforts underscore the recognition that sea power is not solely predicated on national assets but also on the ability to build and sustain coalitions to address shared security challenges.

The advent of the AUKUS security partnership in September 2021 signalled that policymakers have increasingly viewed the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific regions

as components of an integrated strategic continuum. China's rise does not necessarily pose an immediate threat to the UK's core national interests, but this assumption is contingent upon the maintenance of a regional balance of military power within the Indo-Pacific. As long as such a balance is preserved, Beijing is unlikely to attempt actions that could significantly disrupt global trade and economic stability. In seeking to constrain China's strategic reach without direct confrontation, the UK aligns itself with several regional powers that share concerns regarding Beijing's growing assertiveness.<sup>33</sup> This alignment necessitates a nuanced approach: the UK must determine how to limit China's influence in the Indo-Pacific while maintaining a measured military presence, given its naval resource constraints. A key element of this strategy involves strengthening partnerships with like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific, including Australia. The AUKUS partnership as a whole provides a valuable mechanism for expanding defence capabilities in the Indo-Pacific while simultaneously enhancing Britain's naval strength within the Euro-Atlantic framework through the procurement of the Royal Navy's own future SSN fleet.

## Deterrence

SRF-West builds on current British activities in the region. Two River-class offshore patrol vessels, HMS Spey and HMS Tamar, are deployed in the Indo-Pacific, supporting regional partners in areas such as anti-smuggling, fishery protection and counter-terrorism operations, as well as taking part in military exercises. The 2021 deployment of a British carrier strike group to the Indo-Pacific has been followed by another in 2025 led by HMS Prince of Wales, which will include port visits, as well as a series of exercises and operations.<sup>34</sup> British participation in regional exercises has also been strong, including a series of cross-domain multinational activities.

Taken together, these all weave into the dual aim of deterring adversaries from aggressive practices while strengthening regional partnerships and interoperability – and the SRF-West deployment will do likewise. The presence of a British submarine in the Indo-Pacific supports the other deployments and adds to the strength of the broader signals being sent

while offering a further opportunity to supplement intelligence-gathering and improve regional domain awareness.

The deployment of a single Royal Navy Astute-class submarine to Australia may, at first glance, appear to be a symbolic gesture, perhaps even tokenistic, especially given that the UK's predominant contribution to the agreement centres around its technical and industrial role in designing and delivering the future SSN-AUKUS platform. However, a more considered assessment reveals that this move carries substantial strategic and operational implications for the UK's role in the evolving security architecture of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>35</sup> The deployment represents a qualitatively distinct form of British defence engagement in the region. Unlike expeditionary deployments, SRF-West constitutes a semi-permanent, high-end warfighting posture. Its primary objective is to mitigate the risk of a regional capability gap ahead of Australia's acquisition of its own SSN-AUKUS fleet, thereby maintaining a credible deterrent against coercive or aggressive Chinese behaviour, particularly in maritime flashpoints such as the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

The UK's commitment to forward-deploying an SSN should be understood as a significant strategic choice. Submarines are not patrol vessels or highly visible tools for symbolic presence. They are platforms designed for high-intensity operations, including anti-submarine warfare and long-range strike missions. Their stealth and endurance make them particularly well-suited for contested environments and intelligence collection. In contrast to the ongoing River-class deployment or the episodic throughput of a carrier strike group, an Astute-class SSN marks a far more consequential contribution to regional deterrence. This deployment aligns with the broader logic of integrated deterrence and is indicative of the UK's willingness to share in the risks of a rapidly evolving Indo-Pacific security landscape.

From a strategic deterrence perspective, SRF-West is arguably the most operationally significant element of the AUKUS agreement in the short to medium term. While the industrial and technological collaboration



↑ The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, the Hon Richard Marles MP at an AUKUS Defence Ministers' Meeting with UK Secretary of State for Defence, the Rt Hon John Healey and US Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth, to discuss and maximise the strategic benefits of the AUKUS partnership in supporting security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

underpinning SSN-AUKUS is a long-term project, SRF-West represents a tangible, near-term manifestation of allied resolve. By 2031, when SRF-West is expected to be fully operational with multiple SSNs in rotation, the trilateral force posture in the Indo-Pacific could be dramatically enhanced. If, as anticipated, Australia begins operating Virginia-class submarines from 2032, the number of allied SSNs based in the western Pacific could grow substantially.

The contribution of SSNs to collective deterrence cannot be overstated. Their ability to operate covertly in contested waters, conduct surveillance, interdict naval forces, control sea lines of communication, and deliver long-range precision strikes via cruise missiles makes them an indispensable asset in any deterrent posture aimed at

countering China's military calculus. The interoperability being developed under AUKUS, including the integration of Australian personnel on American and British submarines and vice versa, further reinforces this deterrent value. Any hostile action against an SRF-West SSN, or the submarine base itself, risks drawing in all three AUKUS partners, thereby increasing the potential costs to Beijing of initiating conflict.

The UK's willingness to allocate one of its limited fleet of SSNs to the Indo-Pacific underscores the weight of this commitment, particularly in light of concurrent fiscal pressures and the threat from Russia closer to home. The deployment not only signals the UK's intent to embed itself in the Indo-Pacific security ecosystem but also provides an operational platform for training

Australian submariners, refining trilateral command structures, and developing joint operational doctrines. Nevertheless, the UK will necessarily play a junior role within SRF-West, which will likely be American-led in most operational respects.

However, the implications of this forward deployment become particularly acute in the event of a regional crisis. If a conflict were to erupt over Taiwan or in the South China Sea, and American submarines based at SRF-West were ordered into action, the question of British participation would loom large if an Astute were present. Forward deployment changes the strategic equation: the threshold for involvement may be perceived as lower, and the political costs of abstaining higher.

## CHAPTER 3

# United States: SRF-West as a Near-Term Force Multiplier

The AUKUS agreement is one of the most significant security and technology-sharing arrangements in decades.

Although the possibility of Australia acquiring American nuclear-powered submarines (under AUKUS Pillar 1, Phase 2) and co-designed nuclear-powered submarines (under AUKUS Pillar 1, Phase 3) has understandably attracted most of the attention, many of the benefits to the United States are delivered by establishing SRF-West at HMAS Stirling (under AUKUS Pillar 1, Phase 1). Critics have expressed concerns about the political feasibility of selling US Virginia-class submarines to Australia by the 2030s, the timelines and costs of building newly-designed AUKUS-class submarines in the 2040s, and the speed of delivery of the advanced capabilities promised under AUKUS Pillar 2. But few US-based experts have opposed rotating US submarines through HMAS Stirling and establishing SRF-West. Indeed, the strategic rationale of SRF-West is clear and, from an American standpoint, the first phase of the first pillar delivers much of AUKUS's value.

### The Indo-Pacific's Geographical Fulcrum

Australia was essential territory for US operations during World War II, but in the decades that followed, Americans came to think of Australia more as a global force contributor than a regional access provider.<sup>36</sup> Australian intelligence collection facilities at Pine Gap remained vital, but over the years leaders in Canberra and Washington tended to emphasise the value of Australia's troop contributions abroad rather than its geostrategic position closer to home. In recent years, however, this dynamic began to shift. China's rise and the challenges posed by its increasingly capable power projection forces have reversed this dynamic. As Admiral David Johnson, Chief of the Australian Defence Force, recently noted: "We're having to reconsider Australia as a homeland from which we will conduct combat operations."<sup>37</sup>

Although AUKUS surprised many when it was announced in 2021, the ideas behind it had been circulating among American and Australian experts for over a decade. In 2013, a report from the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments concluded, "from a strategic perspective, the case for an Australian nuclear-powered submarine force is compelling."<sup>38</sup> The report advocated the acquisition of US Virginia-class submarines by Australia. It also supported, "Joint basing at HMAS Stirling [to] lessen some challenges and risks of Australia operating US-designed nuclear submarines." In 2016, the Center for Strategic and International Studies suggested that, "In the long term, the US Navy should also consider homeporting several Virginia-class submarines in the Indian Ocean region. Locations to consider should include HMAS Stirling... US submarines based in the Indian Ocean could improve interoperability with Australia's Future Submarines and help create a southern maintenance and resupply location for US Navy vessels."<sup>39</sup>

The logic articulated then still holds today. The United States only has access to a handful of operating locations across the Pacific Ocean. These facilities are vulnerable to attacks by Chinese air, naval, and missile forces. Expanding air and naval access in Australia not only expands this set of facilities, but it also links the US presence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The main American submarine resupply point to Australia's northeast is Diego Garcia, and to its northwest is Guam. The two islands are separated by air by over 8,000 kilometres, and vessels transiting between the two must sail even further through shallow and potentially contested waters. Australia has the geographic value of being well situated between these two, located far enough away to make Chinese attacks more difficult. It is also more politically aligned with the United States than some partners in Southeast Asia, which might seek to avoid taking sides in a contingency between China and the United States

alongside its regional allies.

### An Early Demonstration of AUKUS's Value

These advantages are substantial and make SRF-West highly valuable for US forces. This value is not dependent on progress made in the rest of the AUKUS arrangement. Phase 1 would help train Australians how to maintain and operate Virginia-class submarines (and nuclear-powered submarines more generally), so it is foundational to Phases 2 and 3. Many Australian (and British) officials and experts therefore view AUKUS as a carefully structured set of interlocking agreements. Yet, this is less true in US assessments, since SRF-West is valuable to the United States regardless of any additional progress under AUKUS. From a US perspective, Phase 1 is largely separate from Phases 2 and 3 (although Phases 2 and 3 require Phase 1). Indeed, when the Optimal Pathway was first announced, senior US officials privately made clear that Phase 1 would be valuable to the United States, even if Phases 2 and 3 never materialise.<sup>40</sup>

The different values that the three allies put on the different phases of AUKUS create a political risk to the arrangement. US officials are likely to continue supporting AUKUS Phase 1 regardless of who is in power in Washington, since it delivers immediate value to the United States. Phase 1 delivers for the United States in the 2020s, whereas Phase 2 most likely would deliver submarines to Australia in the 2030s, and Phase 3 would probably deliver submarines to the United Kingdom and Australia in the 2040s. Given the long timelines involved, there are already rumours about various Plan B options in case Phase 2 or 3 collapses.<sup>41</sup> Most acute is the risk that US production of Virginia-class submarines does not increase at the previously planned pace, leading politicians in Washington to oppose transferring approximately 5-10% of the US attack submarine force to Australia in the critical decade of the 2030s.<sup>42</sup> Although President Trump has reaffirmed support for AUKUS, the actual decision to transfer US nuclear-

powered submarines to Australia will not occur during his term. Another risk is that British and Australian industries are unable to produce AUKUS-class submarines quickly or cheaply enough to justify continued development and procurement by the two governments.

As a result, it is possible that the United States will enthusiastically support AUKUS Phase 1, but will lose interest as Phases 2 and 3 mature. The Trump administration's decision to conduct a review of AUKUS frightened many who feared exactly this. If the United States were to decide not to transfer Virginia-class submarines to Australia, this could call into question not only Phase 2 of AUKUS but also Phases 1 and 3. Interoperability among Australian, American, and British forces would be imperilled, along with Australia's ability to build expertise in operating and maintaining nuclear-powered submarines. This would be a major mistake. Furthermore, Australia might respond by calling into question cooperation under Phase 1 of AUKUS, which would curtail the benefits of sanctuary and strategic depth for US forces, both of which are otherwise hard to find across the East Asian theatre.

### Maximising SRF-West's Strategic Value and Political Sustainability

Since the deployment and sustainment of US nuclear-powered submarines at HMAS Stirling are valuable to the United States, independent of any other elements of the AUKUS agreement, it is incumbent that Phase 1 proceeds quickly and successfully. To date, planning and construction at HMAS Stirling have been rapid and have helped demonstrate to Washington both the seriousness of Australia's commitment to AUKUS and the benefits of proceeding with the agreement.<sup>43</sup>

To get the most value out of AUKUS, the United States and Australia can add uncrewed undersea vehicles to their list of capabilities deployed to HMAS Stirling. Given the small number of Collins-class, Virginia-class, and AUKUS-class submarines that Australia will operate in the coming decades, it is incumbent upon all three governments to increase undersea capabilities and capacities by augmenting them with uncrewed systems. Large and extra-large UUVs could help to monitor vessels passing through key chokepoints, particularly the Sunda and Lombok Straits. All three governments are pursuing these capabilities, but interoperability among them has heretofore been a key question. Deploying uncrewed

undersea vehicles alongside Virginia-class, Astute-class, and Collins-class boats would ensure that the allies maximise their interoperability. Additionally, if Phases 2 or 3 of AUKUS are delayed or otherwise modified, uncrewed undersea systems could help bridge any emergent capability or capacity gaps. Industry is providing a range of options for large- and medium-sized uncrewed undersea vehicles. These should be a top priority for the governments under AUKUS Pillar Two in the coming years.

All three countries can also talk more in public about the value that AUKUS Phase 1 provides, alongside other posture changes in Australia, particularly in terms of access to Australian air bases. The AUKUS discussion in Washington is often focused on the potential risks associated with Phase 2, and has therefore overlooked the most obvious benefits to the United States: deploying and sustaining Virginia-class submarines in Perth. Since Phase 1 has few critics, it seldom gets the attention it deserves. This is why it remains important that all three countries drive attention toward the substantial and rapid progress being made at Perth. Otherwise, American criticism of Australian defence spending levels and questioning of Phases 2 and 3 could lead to a deterioration in support for AUKUS.



↑ United States Navy Virginia class fast-attack submarine, USS Vermont (SSN 792), departs HMAS Stirling after completing a Submarine Maintenance Period in Western Australia 2025

## Conclusion

### For Australia, hosting SRF-West delivers both immediate and enduring strategic dividends.

It accelerates the RAN's pathway to sovereign SSNs, expands allied presence in the northeast Indian Ocean, reinforces deterrence against China, helps to lock in US and UK commitment to the region, and drives economic and industrial transformation in Western Australia. In many ways, SRF-West offers strategic payoffs today for capabilities that otherwise lie in the future. By drawing on the enduring constant of geography, just as Fremantle anchored allied submarine campaigns in WWII, Australia positions itself once again as a hub of coalition undersea power in the Indo-Pacific. In doing so, SRF-West not only strengthens Australia's national defence but also underscores its role as a committed, capable, and indispensable ally in the coalition effort to uphold regional stability.

Ultimately, for the UK, the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific is evolving in ways that necessitate an enhanced commitment to maritime security by London and its partners. The emergence of a Chinese navy with expeditionary capabilities carries profound implications for the Royal Navy and the broader Euro-Atlantic security architecture. As China continues to expand its maritime capabilities, it is reshaping the strategic environment in ways that necessitate a response from established maritime powers, including the UK. By strengthening its naval presence, deepening security partnerships, and maintaining a commitment to upholding international norms, the UK can contribute meaningfully to the stability of the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

The benefits of AUKUS and SRF-West are clear. It offers the UK an enhanced deterrence posture, a

strengthened alliance framework, and a significant technological edge. While the deployment of a single UK SSN to SRF-West may appear modest in scale, it carries profound implications for the UK's strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific. It deepens operational integration with key partners, enhances deterrence against potential Chinese aggression, and signals the UK's readiness to bear a meaningful share of the burden in upholding regional security.

From an American perspective, SRF-West is arguably the most important part of AUKUS. Unfortunately, Phase 1 is also the most overlooked of the Pillar One and Pillar Two initiatives. AUKUS is intended to increase the shared defence capability of all three countries, but this military objective rests upon a political foundation that must be fortified in the years ahead. SRF-West is highly valuable, and leaders in all three countries must demonstrate this to the American, Australian, and British publics to maintain political support in the years ahead.



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