



TUCSON COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

Australia's Strategic Moves on the Global Chessboard



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On October 27th, I delved into the insights of Australia's Consul General in Los Angeles, Jane Duke, at the Tucson Committee on Foreign Relations dinner. Exploring Australia's role in the Indo-Pacific and the significant AUKUS deal, Duke's dance with challenging queries sparked intriguing concerns from our members. This piece unravels those questions, inviting you to join the discourse on Australia's pivotal global position.

Prior to her speech, I wondered:

1. How is Australia navigating regional trade agreements amid China's tensions over Taiwan?
2. What do nuclear powered submarines mean for Australia and their role on the world stage?
3. How does the AUKUS alliance benefit the US?

Eggs in More Than One Basket

As Jane Duke shared, Australia seeks to create prosperous opportunities in the region, believing that collaboration will be most effective over separateness. They already enjoy a free trade agreement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and other countries, and work alongside the Quad partnership (Australia, Japan, India, and United States) to ensure prosperous opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region, which includes China.

Duke highlights strides in Australia-China ties, especially in barley and wine trade, sparking optimism. Yet, Australia, heavily reliant on exports, is actively diversifying its trade alliances to hedge risks. With 30% of total exports currently heading to China, there's a significant opportunity for economic tension. Additionally, Australia aims to wield its Lithium resources for a clean energy superpower status, potentially unsettling existing coal-centric deals with China.

This leaves me to wonder if diversifying trade channels will cause a ripple effect of disruption throughout the world? Will this cause tension in other countries or provoke Chinese sanctions that further disrupt Australia's economic opportunities?

Shifting Australia's Power Play

As Australia embraces cutting-edge nuclear powered submarines through the AUKUS (Australia, UK, US) deal, a surge in research, development, and job opportunities is set to redefine the nation's capabilities. This landmark deal promises not just strengthened defense but a \$6 billion investment, 20,000 jobs, and a leap in industrial proficiency.

Duke reiterated that these new submarines will fortify global standing, ensuring a robust defense. These vessels, serving as a deterrent in the Indo-Pacific, rebalances power dynamics by sending a clear message to potential disruptors. By reinforcing maritime capabilities and bolstering regional influence, Australia adopts a more proactive stance, enhancing border security. In her speech, Duke emphasized how this deal is vital for Australia's goal to establish strategic equilibrium and regional peace.

However, it caused me to wonder if this goal is even appropriate given today's turbulent times. Are they biting off more than they can chew considering the current global conflicts in Ukraine, Israel, and China-Taiwan? Of course we all want world peace but this seems highly improbable at the moment. Even if the new submarines provide more security and influence to Australia, will this inadvertently escalate tensions, particularly with China? Is it fair for other countries to view this development as a potential threat?

US Influence on AUKUS Deal?

In my interview with Duke, the key benefit of the AUKUS deal for the US was emphasized: a more capable security partner. Australia's strategic location is pivotal, serving as a gateway for US influence in the Indo-Pacific. With a reliable partner, the delicate power balance in the region, especially amid China-Taiwan tensions, can be maintained. Through AUKUS, the US

gains access to crucial naval facilities and ports in Australia, extending military reach and logistical capabilities.

However, when hearing this I thought to myself: Is the US leveraging Australia's strategic position for regional peace or using them as a pawn in pursuits to assert global influence? While Duke stressed Australia's commitment to the status quo on Taiwan tensions, concerns arise. Is Australia being drawn into a conflict it shouldn't be in, given their focus on maintaining trade relations with all nations? Is the US dragging Australia into a potential war just to take advantage of their proximity to China?

Duke's assertion that Australia “Wouldn't invest trillions in nuclear-powered submarines if we didn't feel the need to do so,” introduces a complex perspective. Debate surfaces over the alliance's focus: military advantage for the US or a strategic move for Australia's autonomy. Despite uncertainties, the US anticipates a \$1 billion industrial boost and tech transfer authorization for space launches, suggesting the AUKUS deal does extend beyond military objectives.

Final Thoughts

Overall, the key takeaways from Consul General Duke's speech are:

1. Australia's aim: Peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific
2. AUKUS submarine deal brings economic gains for Australia and the US
3. Power equilibrium? Think of it as a high-stakes geostrategic Jenga game

Sources:

Australian Consul General Jane Duke Speech, Oct. 27, 2023

“Aukus Nuclear-Powered Submarine Pathway.” *Australian Government Crest*, 14 Mar. 2023, www.pm.gov.au/media/aukus-nuclear-powered-submarine-pathway#:~:text=The%20agreement%20will%3A,%2C%20skills%2C%20jobs%20and%20infrastructure. Accessed 03 Nov. 2023.