

The Alliance Reserve

Australia's greatest AUKUS vulnerability sits at home, in a public consensus thinning faster than anything happening in Washington.



Australians spend extraordinary energy asking whether America still believes in the alliance. The more urgent question is whether Australians do. [One hundred thousand and twenty-one people filled the Melbourne Cricket Ground on 11 September](#) to watch the San Francisco 49ers defeat the Los Angeles Rams in the first National Football League regular season game held in Australia, [almost half of them travelling from interstate or overseas](#) and drawn from more than thirty-five countries. Government measured the week in hotel occupancy and economic impact. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of 9/11, the American relationship arrived in Australia as something other than a tariff negotiation or a force posture agreement, and at half time an American band, the Jonas Brothers, performed John Farnham's You're the Voice to the stadium and to a television audience across the United States. That moment probably did more for the alliance's durability than a ministerial communiqué.

Australian debate about the alliance remains fixed on Washington. Will the submarines arrive, will the tariffs hold, will a future administration honour commitments made by its predecessors? The questions are reasonable and the

answers uncertain. Yet the greater strategic risk may not be American wavering, but Australian doubt.

The [Lowy Institute found in June that 31 per cent of Australians trust the United States](#) to act responsibly, the lowest figure it has recorded and a fall of twenty-five points in two years, with six in ten expressing no confidence at all in the American president, and [a narrow majority saying Australia should now distance itself from the United States. Support for the alliance itself holds at 73 per cent while registering the sharpest sustained fall in the Poll's history](#), down ten points since 2024. The [United States Studies Centre found in May](#) that Americans are ten times more likely than not to say the alliance with Australia makes America safer, with majorities of both Trump and Harris voters agreeing. Australian conviction has moved the other way. The share of Australians who believe the alliance makes Australia more secure has fallen to 42 per cent from 63 per cent in 2022, and confidence that Washington would defend Australia against a Chinese attack has slipped to 68 per cent from 84 per cent in 2023. American belief in the relationship is currently stronger than Australian belief in it, and that should trouble Canberra more than it does.

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What holds an alliance together once the government of the day stops supplying reasons is the accumulated stock of familiarity between the two societies. Call it the alliance reserve: the social capital of recognition that allied societies build across decades and that governments draw down whenever politics becomes difficult. Reserves of this kind deplete gradually, replenish slowly, and reveal their adequacy only when needed. Australia has been spending its reserve with the United States since 2024 while investing very little in rebuilding it.

The strategic consequence runs through deterrence. Submarines, treaties and bases deter only while an adversary believes the political commitment behind them will survive a period of stress, which turns allied public opinion into a target in its own right. Beijing has no need for Australians marching against AUKUS. It needs enough of them to remain unsure for long enough that a future government comes to read the submarines as a cost rather than an insurance policy. Manufacturing that doubt is the cheapest instrument available to an adversary, and the only one that operates on the same thirty-year timescale as the programme.

Australian policy machinery remains indifferent. Canberra invests heavily across the Indo-Pacific through PacificAus Sports and Team Up, which recognise that

familiarity shapes strategic outcomes. Australia's [Sports Diplomacy Strategy 2032](#) applies that logic across the region while barely mentioning the ally on which the entire defence posture depends. American culture reaches Australian audiences continuously, and Australian presence in the United States remains fragmentary and largely accidental. The Victorian Government, pursuing tourism outcomes, delivered more American exposure to Australian audiences in one week than the Federal Government has attempted deliberately in years.

AUKUS is a political project disguised as an engineering project. The conventional discussion covers shipyard timelines, reactor technology, industrial capacity and workforce shortages, all of which matter and none of which decide it.

Nuclear-powered submarines require three decades of democratic consent. The [Australian Submarine Agency expects the first capability in the early 2030s](#), which is the beginning of the commitment rather than the end. Australian governments must keep appropriating across successive electoral cycles, American administrations must keep supporting transfer arrangements, Congress must keep funding shipyard capacity, and leaders in both countries must keep choosing continuity over retreat. No adversary needs to sink a submarine if one of the participating societies loses confidence in the alliance. History is littered with strategic projects that were never defeated by adversaries, only abandoned by societies that lost confidence in them. The withdrawal of support seldom presents itself as retreat. It usually arrives disguised as fiscal responsibility.

The realist objection arrives predictably. Alliances are settled by geography and interest, and no football crowd will alter a Pentagon review or a tariff schedule. Geography does most of the heavy lifting. The objection fails at the point where Australia's strategic future now sits, because deterrence depends on credibility and credibility depends on political durability. A thirty-year proposition operating inside two democratic systems requires consent, consent requires understanding, and only 31 per cent of Australians say their own government has adequately explained why the alliance exists. That is a resilience problem mistaken for a communications problem.

Australian history offers the pattern. In August 1908 [more than half a million people, well over five in six of Sydney's population, gathered at the harbour](#) to watch the American Great White Fleet enter Port Jackson, on an invitation Alfred Deakin extended despite British discomfort. Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz concluded that the visit shifted Australian sentiment decisively towards the United States. [ANZUS would not emerge for another forty-three years](#). Treaties rarely create relationships. More often they certify what two societies have already decided to have.

Australia's response should be proportionate to the asset at risk, and it is cheap. Extend the sports diplomacy strategy to the United States and support exchanges in both directions. Treat major events as instruments of alliance policy, and coordinate with the states that stage them. Expand exchange programs to



connect American veterans, legislators, researchers and students with Australians. Measure alliance familiarity annually, publish it, and track it as closely as shipbuilding schedules. A country that maintains its hardware while losing confidence in the relationships that give it purpose is in strategic decline without realising it.

Democracies are entering a period in which formal commitments will be tested more often than honoured automatically, and the alliances that endure will be those whose citizens still recognise one another when crises arrive. This is the neglected strategic reserve of the democratic world. An alliance reserve takes generations to build and years to exhaust, cannot be manufactured during a crisis, and cannot be surged after deterrence fails.

Deakin understood what many modern strategists have forgotten, which is that a treaty is the receipt rather than the relationship. The alliances that shape this century will be the ones a hundred thousand people turned up for, decades before anyone thought to write them down.