



Beyond the Submarine

Reframing AUKUS through Comparative Security Advantage, industrial integration and sovereign irregular deterrence

Submission to the Independent Public Inquiry into AUKUS

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This submission supports the strategic logic of AUKUS. It does not accept that the current sovereign submarine acquisition pathway has been adequately explained, tested or justified to Australian taxpayers.

The distinction matters. AUKUS may be necessary, but its public purpose has become blurred. Australia has been asked to accept a generational commitment before the Government has clearly separated the alliance value of AUKUS from the platform politics of sovereign submarine ownership.

Executive Summary

This submission argues that Australia should preserve AUKUS, preserve and expand Submarine Rotational Force-West (SRF-West), and discontinue the acquisition pathway for sovereign Australian nuclear-powered submarines. It also argues that AUKUS requires a clearer public bargain. Australians are entitled to understand what AUKUS is for, what it costs, which obligations are unavoidable and which policy choices remain open.

That position is not anti-AUKUS, anti-alliance or anti-defence. It is an argument against allowing platform momentum to substitute for strategic judgement. AUKUS has already achieved much of its immediate strategic purpose by enabling allied nuclear-powered submarines to operate from Western Australia. The remaining question is whether Australia should now spend hundreds of billions of dollars trying to own the most expensive part of that capability itself, or whether it should redirect that investment toward areas where Australia can generate greater strategic effect, faster.

This submission answers that question through a framework it calls Comparative Security Advantage. The core idea is simple. Allies should not all try to build the same force structure. They should specialise in the capabilities that allow each partner to make the greatest contribution to collective deterrence, relative to its opportunity cost.

On that test, sovereign ownership of nuclear-powered submarines is a weak fit for Australia. It duplicates capability that already exists within the alliance, depends on a strained United States submarine industrial base, delivers principal sovereign effect too late, concentrates risk in a small number of platforms, and diverts national investment from capabilities Australia can build, scale and use more effectively. It also asks the public to accept an extraordinary fiscal commitment without sufficient clarity about alternatives.

SRF-West gives Australia the core allied undersea presence effect without requiring Australia to assume the full burden of sovereign SSN ownership. From as early as 2027, one United Kingdom and up to four United States conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines are expected to rotate through HMAS Stirling. That delivers deterrence, infrastructure investment, workforce development, nuclear stewardship and deeper operational integration. Those benefits do not disappear if Australia chooses not to acquire its own SSNs.

The opportunity cost is substantial. The Parliamentary Budget Office estimated the nuclear-powered submarine program at \$367.6 billion over 2023-24 to 2054-55, including \$122.9 billion in contingency. That estimate is not an immediately available pool of cash. It spans more than three decades and includes expenditure that is already sunk, contractually committed or contingent. Cancellation would avoid future expenditure and release planned funding only as commitments are unwound.

For that reason, the alternative cannot depend on an optimistic assumption that savings will automatically be redirected. Any decision to discontinue sovereign SSN acquisition should be accompanied by a Comparative Security Advantage Reinvestment Plan that separates sunk costs from cancellable commitments and future avoided expenditure, ring-fences a defined share of the avoided expenditure within Defence, establishes separately identified multi-year appropriations for the replacement capability portfolio, and subjects delivery to independent review and parliamentary reporting.

Australia should spend differently and more efficiently. It should redirect the secured funding toward autonomous maritime systems, guided weapons, cyber and electronic warfare, critical minerals, advanced manufacturing, test and evaluation, northern and western infrastructure, regional access and Indo-Pacific logistics.

The real promise of AUKUS is not that Australia may one day own nuclear-powered submarines. It is that Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States can build a trusted defence technology, production and supply-chain ecosystem capable of out-innovating and out-producing authoritarian competitors. That promise requires more than ministerial communiques. It requires public explanation, industrial detail and a credible account of what Australian taxpayers are buying.

In parallel, Australia should build and resource a National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise as a sovereign Australian capability, not as an AUKUS institution. Its authority, command, legal basis, oversight and regional legitimacy should remain Australian. AUKUS Pillar II may provide selected technical enablers and interoperability, but the enterprise should not depend on allied approval or imply that AUKUS authorises Australian irregular or influence operations.

Australia should separately establish a whole-of-government economic security and economic warfare capability. It should operate independently of both AUKUS and the National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise, while drawing on intelligence and supporting trusted supply-chain resilience. This would allow Australia to act regardless of the future course of AUKUS and to work with regional and global partners beyond the trilateral partnership.

Finally, SRF-West requires practical stewardship infrastructure. Australia should not treat waste, environmental assurance, transport, custody, public reporting and community confidence as afterthoughts to AUKUS. Tellus's Sandy Ridge facility in Western Australia should be examined as one option for the Australian low-level radioactive waste component of that system. It is not a solution for spent fuel or high-

level waste, and should not be described as one. But it may form part of a broader AUKUS Stewardship Infrastructure model that properly supports SRF-West while building public confidence.

This submission recommends an orderly transition. Preserve AUKUS. Preserve SRF-West. Do not proceed with sovereign SSN acquisition. Secure the reinvestment before assuming it. Build Australia's sovereign irregular warfare, intelligence and economic security capabilities on their own legal and policy foundations. Build public understanding before locking in irreversible commitments.

Principal Recommendations

1. Discontinue the sovereign nuclear-powered submarine acquisition pathway while preserving AUKUS and SRF-West.
2. Use SRF-West as Australia's principal Pillar I contribution to allied undersea deterrence from Australian territory.
3. Establish a Comparative Security Advantage Reinvestment Plan that identifies sunk costs, cancellable commitments and future avoided expenditure, and ring-fences a defined share of that expenditure for funded replacement capabilities.
4. Redirect secured investment toward distributed maritime denial, autonomous systems, guided weapons, cyber, electronic warfare, critical minerals, advanced manufacturing and northern and western infrastructure.
5. Establish a sovereign National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise centred on ASIS, Special Operations Command and the National Intelligence Community, with a regional focus on Southeast Asia and the Pacific, but outside AUKUS governance.
6. Establish a separate whole-of-government economic security and economic warfare capability that can operate independently of AUKUS and the National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise.
7. Reframe AUKUS as a trusted defence industrial environment, using the licence-free environment, the NTIB and DPA Title III to build a full-cycle allied supply-chain solution.
8. Develop AUKUS Stewardship Infrastructure to support SRF-West, with Tellus Sandy Ridge examined as one Australian option for low-level radioactive waste, and with a clear distinction maintained between low-level operational waste, spent fuel and high-level waste.
9. Establish an independent and ongoing AUKUS Investment Review to test expenditure and certify the Comparative Security Advantage Reinvestment Plan in terms Parliament and the public can understand.
10. Create separate public engagement and social licence processes for AUKUS, the National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise and the national economic security capability, so that the purpose and authority of each are not blurred.

About the Author

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Through TAFI, Adam focuses on converting allied strategic intent into practical policy, industrial and operational outcomes. His work examines the intersection of national security, economic statecraft, defence technology, irregular competition and regional resilience, with a particular focus on Australia's role in the Indo-Pacific and the future of allied defence integration.

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Section 1. Comparative Security Advantage: a better framework for judging AUKUS

This submission begins from a simple proposition: Australia should judge AUKUS not by whether it delivers the most prestigious platform, but by whether it delivers the most cost-effective strategic effect for the Australian people, the alliance and the regional balance of power.

The AUKUS Public Inquiry asks whether AUKUS will keep Australia safe and at what cost. That framing is appropriate, because the central public policy issue is not whether nuclear-powered submarines are capable platforms. They are. The question is whether Australian sovereign ownership of nuclear-powered submarines is the best use of Australia's finite strategic, industrial and fiscal resources. This submission argues that it is not.[1]

Australia should continue to support AUKUS as a strategic, technological and industrial partnership. However, Australia should discontinue the acquisition of sovereign nuclear-powered submarines and instead redirect the relevant investment toward capabilities where Australia can generate greater allied value, greater deterrent effect and greater national resilience. That decision should not be taken behind a wall of technical jargon. AUKUS is now too large, too expensive and too consequential to proceed without a clearer public mandate.

Context Box: Comparative Security Advantage

Comparative Security Advantage applies the economic concept of comparative advantage to alliance strategy.

In economic terms, comparative advantage means that countries gain when each specialises in the activities where it can produce the greatest value at the lowest relative opportunity cost. Applied to national security, the same logic suggests that allies should not all try to build the same force structure. They should specialise in the capabilities that allow each partner to make the greatest contribution to collective deterrence.[2]

For AUKUS, this means Australia should not measure its contribution by whether it can replicate the most complex platforms of larger allies. The United States already possesses unmatched naval scale. The United Kingdom possesses advanced submarine design and nuclear stewardship expertise. Australia's comparative security advantage lies elsewhere: geography, regional access, intelligence, special operations, autonomous systems, critical minerals, test ranges, advanced manufacturing, cyber, space, AI, northern infrastructure and Indo-Pacific logistics.

What can Australia contribute that generates the greatest allied security effect relative to its opportunity cost?

Comparative Security Advantage does not argue for a smaller Australian role in AUKUS. It argues for a more distinctive and higher-value Australian role.

SRF-West has already delivered the core strategic effect

The most important strategic benefit of AUKUS Pillar I is not Australian ownership of a particular class of submarine. It is the establishment of an allied nuclear-powered submarine presence in the Indo-Pacific, operating from Australian territory and integrated with Australian infrastructure, personnel and planning.

That effect is already being delivered through SRF-West. From as early as 2027, AUKUS partners are expected to maintain a rotational presence at HMAS Stirling of one United Kingdom and up to four United States conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines.[3]

This has already changed the strategic equation. Australia no longer faces a binary choice between AUKUS and no AUKUS, or between allied undersea presence and no allied undersea presence. SRF-West already

provides Australia with the strategic benefit of forward-deployed allied undersea capability operating from Western Australia.

The marginal decision before Australia is therefore narrower and more specific. Having already secured allied nuclear-powered submarine presence through SRF-West, should Australia proceed with the additional cost, risk and opportunity cost of acquiring its own sovereign nuclear-powered submarine fleet? This submission argues that it should not.

The benefits of SRF-West are not contingent on sovereign submarine ownership

Public discussion often assumes that the industrial, workforce and infrastructure benefits of AUKUS depend upon Australia ultimately acquiring sovereign nuclear-powered submarines. That assumption should be tested.

The infrastructure and workforce benefits associated with SRF-West are already substantial. The Australian Government has announced investment of up to \$8 billion to expand HMAS Stirling in Western Australia, supporting approximately 3,000 direct Australian jobs.[4] Those jobs and infrastructure investments are tied to the establishment and sustainment of SRF-West. They include construction, engineering, logistics, maintenance, base support, nuclear stewardship, workforce development, security, transport and associated regional economic activity.

The United States Navy's establishment of Naval Support Activity Stirling further demonstrates the permanence and operational significance of SRF-West. NSA Stirling is intended to provide support services and programs for US service members, civilian personnel, contractors and families assigned to SRF-West.[5]

Australia should therefore distinguish between three separate policy questions: whether Australia should remain part of AUKUS; whether Australia should host and support allied nuclear-powered submarines through SRF-West; and whether Australia should acquire and operate its own sovereign fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. This submission answers the first two questions in the affirmative. It answers the third in the negative.

SRF-West requires AUKUS Stewardship Infrastructure

SRF-West also requires credible stewardship infrastructure. This should not be treated as a communications afterthought or as a narrow waste-disposal question. Australia needs an AUKUS Stewardship Infrastructure model: a publicly understood, technically regulated and regionally credible system for low-level operational waste, environmental monitoring, emergency preparedness, transport, custody, occupational safety, community consultation and long-term assurance.

ARPANSA material on the proposed HMAS Stirling Controlled Industrial Facility indicates that the facility would receive, manage, treat, decontaminate and temporarily store low-level radioactive material generated from submarines during routine operations and maintenance.[6] Temporary storage may be operationally necessary. But temporary storage is not a final disposal pathway.

Tellus's Sandy Ridge facility in Western Australia should be examined as one option for the Australian part of this system. Sandy Ridge is a sovereign, regulated facility designed for hazardous and low-level radioactive waste.[7][8][9] Tellus also publicly presents Traditional Owner and community engagement as part of its model.[43] The relevance of Tellus as a potential stewardship partner is also reinforced by its public partnership with Canada's Nuclear Waste Management Organization.[44] That makes it relevant to SRF-West stewardship planning. It does not make it a complete answer.

Tellus does not solve every nuclear waste problem. It should not be oversold, and it is not a solution for spent fuel or high-level waste. The right approach is an AUKUS Stewardship Infrastructure plan that identifies which waste classes arise from SRF-West, which can be managed in Australia, which remain allied responsibilities, how public reporting will occur, and how Western Australian communities and Traditional

Owners will be engaged. Done properly, this would strengthen social licence for SRF-West even if Australia never owns sovereign SSNs.

Context Box: AUKUS Stewardship Infrastructure

AUKUS Stewardship Infrastructure means the practical system required to support SRF-West safely, credibly and with public confidence. It is not simply a waste-disposal issue. It includes waste classification, environmental monitoring, transport, custody, occupational safety, emergency preparedness, public reporting, community consultation and long-term assurance.

The immediate requirement relates to low-level radioactive material generated through routine submarine operations and maintenance at HMAS Stirling. ARPANSA material on the proposed HMAS Stirling Controlled Industrial Facility indicates that the facility would receive, manage, treat, decontaminate and temporarily store low-level radioactive material from submarines during routine operations and maintenance.[6] That kind of temporary storage may be necessary for SRF-West. But temporary storage should not be confused with a complete stewardship pathway.

A credible stewardship model should distinguish clearly between low-level operational waste, intermediate waste, spent fuel and high-level waste. Public confidence will be damaged if these categories are blurred. SRF-West does not require Australia to solve every future nuclear waste issue. It does require Australia to explain what waste will arise, who is responsible for it, where it will be managed, how it will be transported, how it will be regulated and how communities will be informed.

Tellus's Sandy Ridge facility in Western Australia should be examined as one Australian option for the low-level radioactive waste component of this system. Sandy Ridge is a regulated facility designed for hazardous and low-level radioactive waste, and Tellus publicly presents Traditional Owner and community engagement as part of its model.[7][8][43] That makes it relevant to SRF-West stewardship planning. It does not make it a complete answer.

AUKUS Stewardship Infrastructure should therefore be treated as part of the agreement's full-cycle supply-chain solution. If AUKUS is to build trusted production, sustainment and operational capacity, it must also build trusted systems for stewardship, disposal, environmental assurance and public accountability. Done properly, this would strengthen the social licence for SRF-West and demonstrate that Australia can support allied nuclear-powered submarine rotations responsibly without proceeding to sovereign SSN ownership.

The correct strategic question

The public debate has too often been framed as a choice between supporting or opposing AUKUS. That is the wrong frame. The more precise question is what form of AUKUS best serves Australia's security, economic and technological interests.

This submission's answer is that Australia should preserve AUKUS, preserve SRF-West and abandon the sovereign submarine acquisition pathway. SRF-West gives Australia the strategic effect of allied undersea presence, the economic benefits of infrastructure investment, the workforce benefits of nuclear stewardship and the alliance benefits of deep operational integration. Those benefits should not be treated as automatic justification for sovereign SSN ownership. They should be treated as evidence that AUKUS can succeed without it.

AUKUS requires social licence, not only elite consensus

AUKUS has been treated too often as a settled matter of strategic consensus rather than a live question of public purpose. That is not sustainable. AUKUS commits taxpayers for decades, reshapes Australia's industrial priorities, deepens integration with the United States and United Kingdom, and brings nuclear stewardship obligations into Western Australia. Those choices may be defensible. They still require public understanding.

The public does not need operational detail. It does need an honest account of the purpose of AUKUS, the difference between SRF-West and sovereign SSN ownership, the cost and opportunity cost of the submarine

pathway, the industrial benefits that remain available without sovereign SSNs, and the alternatives that would better match Australia's Comparative Security Advantage.

That explanation should distinguish three different policy questions: what AUKUS authorises and funds; which sovereign Australian defence and intelligence capabilities should be built in parallel; and how Australia should organise whole-of-government economic security. Combining them would muddy AUKUS's purpose and create the false impression that a trilateral technology and industrial partnership authorises Australian irregular, intelligence or influence operations. It does not.

This is not a call for delay by process. It is a call for democratic discipline. AUKUS will not be strengthened by asking voters to accept a generational commitment on trust. It will be strengthened if the Government can explain the bargain clearly enough that Australians can see what is necessary, what is optional and what has simply become bureaucratic momentum.

Section 2. The opportunity cost of sovereign nuclear-powered submarines

The central issue for the Inquiry is not whether nuclear-powered submarines are capable. They are. The issue is whether sovereign ownership of nuclear-powered submarines represents the highest and best use of Australian taxpayer dollars at the expense of Australia's other finite defence resources.

Australia's defence problem is not simply a maritime capability problem. It is a national allocation problem under conditions of strategic urgency, technological disruption and economic coercion. It is also a democratic accountability problem. A program of this scale should not be treated as self-justifying because it carries the AUKUS label.

The Parliamentary Budget Office identified the whole-of-program cost of Australia's nuclear-powered submarine program at \$367.6 billion, including \$122.9 billion in contingency, across the period from 2023-24 to 2054-55. Defence could not provide a year-by-year breakdown because the information remained classified, commercially sensitive and dependent on future US congressional approval for the Virginia-class submarine sale.[10]

That matters because a program of this scale does not merely purchase a capability. It shapes the entire defence system around itself. Once a program becomes large enough, long enough and politically important enough, it becomes more than a procurement decision. It becomes an organising principle. It attracts workforce, capital, ministerial attention, public service bandwidth, industrial policy, infrastructure, regulatory capacity and alliance management effort. The opportunity cost is therefore not limited to the dollar amount appropriated. It includes the capabilities that are delayed, scaled down or never pursued because the national defence enterprise has been configured around a single acquisition pathway. Taxpayers deserve to see that trade-off clearly.

Reinvestment must be secured, not assumed

The opportunity-cost argument has a weakness if it treats the Parliamentary Budget Office estimate as a pool of cash that can simply be reassigned. It is not. The \$367.6 billion estimate is a nominal whole-of-program figure extending to 2054-55 and includes contingency.[10] Some expenditure is already sunk or contractually committed. Most of the fiscal benefit of cancellation would take the form of future expenditure avoided over time.

Nor is there any automatic guarantee that avoided expenditure would remain in Defence or reach the alternatives proposed in this submission. Canberra has cancelled major programs before without delivering the intended replacement capability at the scale or speed originally promised. The alternative force structure therefore requires a funding architecture, not an assumption.

Any decision to discontinue sovereign SSN acquisition should be paired with a Comparative Security Advantage Reinvestment Plan. The plan should publish a baseline separating sunk costs, cancellable commitments and future avoided expenditure; establish separately identified multi-year appropriations for autonomous maritime systems, guided weapons, cyber, electronic warfare, intelligence, northern infrastructure and industrial transition; stage funding against delivery milestones; and require annual certification by the independent AUKUS Investment Review and reporting to Parliament. Legislation would provide the strongest protection, but at minimum the funding lines should be explicit and difficult to absorb into general revenue.

This is how the proposed transition can be made different. Cancellation should not precede the alternative. The cancellation decision, the first funded capability tranches, the workforce transition and the reinvestment mechanism should be announced together.

The risk of capital concentration

The sovereign submarine pathway concentrates strategic capital in a very small number of platforms. That concentration creates fiscal risk, capability risk and strategic risk.

The fiscal risk is obvious. The program extends over more than three decades, across multiple governments, exchange-rate cycles, inflation cycles, US and UK industrial cycles and major technological shifts. Defence itself advised the PBO that the cost estimate and profile would need to be updated as the program matures.[10]

The capability risk is equally direct. The official AUKUS pathway provides for increased US and UK submarine visits, followed by rotations of UK and US submarines to Australia from 2027, then delivery of up to three US Virginia-class nuclear-powered submarines to Australia from as early as the 2030s. The first Australian-built SSN-AUKUS submarine is expected in the early 2040s.[11] That means the largest defence investment in Australian history will not deliver its main sovereign capability effect until well after the near-term period of risk identified in Australian defence policy.

The strategic risk is concentration. By investing so heavily in a small number of exquisite platforms, Australia risks reducing the diversity, adaptability and resilience of the broader force. That is contrary to the logic of deterrence by denial, which depends on making adversary success infeasible, uncertain and costly across multiple domains.

The 2024 National Defence Strategy made a Strategy of Denial the cornerstone of Defence planning and called for an integrated, focused force.[12] The 2026 National Defence Strategy and Integrated Investment Program continued that approach, allocating \$425 billion over the decade to accelerated capability and identifying priority investments in undersea warfare, lethal maritime capabilities, long-range strike, integrated air and missile defence, autonomous and uncrewed systems, counter-uncrewed systems and resilient satellite communications.[13] Those priorities are broader than submarines. They point toward a distributed, adaptive and technologically current model of deterrence.

The allied industrial base constraint

The sovereign submarine pathway also depends on industrial assumptions outside Australia's control. The US submarine industrial base is already under pressure. The Congressional Budget Office reported that, although Congress had authorised and appropriated funds for two Virginia-class submarines per year between 2011 and 2024, shipyards had produced an average of only 1.2 Virginia-class submarines per year over the previous three years and had not achieved a rate of two per year since 2011.[14]

If the United States struggles to produce sufficient Virginia-class submarines for its own force structure, Australia's reliance on receiving US boats becomes exposed to US domestic politics, congressional certification, US Navy force-structure needs and US industrial-base performance. That is not sovereignty in the ordinary sense. It is dependency embedded inside a sovereign ownership model.

By contrast, SRF-West gives Australia the strategic benefit of allied nuclear-powered submarine presence without requiring Australia to own and sustain the most constrained element of the allied naval industrial base.

Autonomous systems and the cost-imposition logic

The opportunity cost of sovereign submarines is sharpened by the rapid maturation of autonomous systems. This is not speculative. It is already reflected in Australian defence investment.

In September 2025, the Australian Government announced a \$1.7 billion investment to acquire a fleet of Australian-designed and built Ghost Shark extra-large autonomous undersea vehicles. Defence stated that Ghost Shark is designed to conduct intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and strike operations

stealthily and at long range, and that the contract covers delivery, maintenance and continued development over five years.[15]

Ghost Shark is not a perfect substitute for a nuclear-powered submarine. It does not need to be. The strategic question is not whether an autonomous undersea vehicle can do everything an SSN can do. It cannot. The question is whether a distributed and evolving family of autonomous undersea, surface, air and space-enabled systems can generate greater denial effect per dollar than a small number of manned submarines delivered decades from now.

RAND Australia has already recognised robotics, autonomous systems and artificial intelligence as key enablers for Australia's future maritime capabilities, while noting that Navy would need transformation across workforce, technology, systems engineering, organisation, information management and doctrine to incorporate these systems effectively.[16]

Context Box: Autonomous Undersea Capability and Relative Cost

Autonomous undersea systems are not a single capability. They range from small, attritable underwater vehicles that can be deployed in large numbers, through survey and mine-countermeasure autonomous underwater vehicles, to large and extra-large systems able to carry heavier payloads over longer distances. This range matters because the central policy question is not whether any one autonomous system can replace a nuclear-powered submarine. It cannot. The better question is whether a mixed autonomous undersea force can create more denial effect, at lower cost and greater scale, than a small number of sovereign nuclear-powered submarines delivered decades from now.

Vatn Systems is a useful example of the low-cost, high-volume end of this market. Vatn describes its S6 class as a compact modular underwater effector that is man-portable, swarm-capable and attritable at scale. Its published specifications indicate a vehicle less than 60 pounds, approximately 5.8 inches in diameter, with payload capacity up to 20 pounds, operational range of at least 20 to 30 nautical miles depending on configuration, and a maximum operational depth of up to 100 metres.[47] Vatn also states that one operator can plan and monitor hundreds of units, which is precisely the kind of cost-imposition logic Australia should be examining for archipelagic and littoral environments.[47]

The indicative cost profile is strategically important. Reuters reporting on Vatn's partnership with Hanwha described Vatn's autonomous undersea drone as priced at about US\$75,000 per unit.[48] That figure should be treated as indicative rather than as a fixed procurement price, but it still illustrates the point. A platform costing tens of thousands of dollars can be bought, lost, adapted and replaced in ways that a manned submarine cannot. It can be used for sensing, deception, shallow-water surveillance, seabed mapping, payload delivery, mine-related missions, special operations support and distributed undersea effects. It can also be deployed from small craft, uncrewed surface vessels, aircraft, beaches or docks, making it directly relevant to the geography of Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

Other systems occupy different parts of the cost-capability spectrum. Small and medium autonomous underwater vehicles such as HII's REMUS family and L3Harris's Iver family are typically more capable, more sensor-rich and more expensive than low-cost attritable systems. Public estimates place autonomous underwater vehicles across a wide cost range, from tens of thousands of dollars at the entry level to several million dollars for larger and more sophisticated systems, depending on endurance, payload, sensors, navigation package and depth rating.[49] The US Navy's MK18 Mod 2 Kingfish, based on the REMUS 600, has previously been reported at approximately US\$1.3 million per vehicle.[50]

Large-diameter and extra-large autonomous undersea vehicles sit higher again. Anduril's Dive-LD is described as a large-diameter autonomous undersea vehicle with modular payloads, long endurance and deep-water operation.[51][52] Australia's Ghost Shark is larger and more ambitious again. The Australian Government has committed A\$1.7 billion to acquire a fleet of Australian-designed and built Ghost Shark extra-large autonomous undersea vehicles for the Royal Australian Navy.[15] At the upper end, Boeing's Orca XLUV demonstrates both the promise and the risk of very large uncrewed undersea systems. The US Navy's early Orca contract was reported at US\$43 million for four vehicles, but later GAO reporting found the program more than three years late and at least

US\$242 million over its original cost estimate, with USNI reporting a ceiling price of US\$281.5 million for five prototype vehicles and subsequent estimated costs of US\$621 million for five prototypes plus a test vehicle.[53]

These examples point to a portfolio logic. Low-cost systems such as Vatn's S6 class offer mass, ambiguity and attritability. Mid-sized autonomous underwater vehicles such as REMUS and Iver offer survey, sensing, mine countermeasures, seabed mapping and military utility at higher but still manageable cost. Large-diameter systems such as Dive-LD provide longer endurance, deeper operation and larger payload capacity. Extra-large systems such as Ghost Shark and Orca begin to approach strategic undersea roles, but they also begin to inherit some of the cost, integration and schedule risks of traditional defence platforms.

The policy lesson is that Australia should not simply replace one exquisite platform with another. It should build a layered autonomous undersea force. At the bottom should be low-cost, attritable and numerous systems. In the middle should be reusable survey, sensing, mine-countermeasure and special operations support vehicles. At the top should be a smaller number of larger, longer-range autonomous systems such as Ghost Shark. Properly integrated with SRF-West, special operations, ASIS, ASD, maritime surveillance, seabed sensing and AUKUS Pillar II technologies, such a portfolio would give Australia an undersea denial capability that is scalable, adaptable and much faster to field than sovereign nuclear-powered submarines.

The point is not that autonomous undersea systems make submarines irrelevant. The point is that they change the cost curve. In a period of economic warfare and strategic competition, that cost curve is itself a form of power.

Indicative relative cost bands

Low-cost attritable UUVs: Vatn S6/TORSK 6 class systems. Indicative cost profile: tens of thousands of US dollars per unit, with public reporting around US\$75,000 for Vatn's underwater drone.[48] Strategic use: swarming, sensing, deception, shallow-water surveillance, mine-related missions, payload delivery and special operations support.

Small and medium AUVs: REMUS 300/600 and Iver-family systems. Indicative cost profile: hundreds of thousands to low millions depending on payload and sensors.[49][50] Strategic use: survey, mine countermeasures, seabed mapping, ISR, port and infrastructure security.

Large-diameter AUVs: Anduril Dive-LD and larger Iver configurations. Indicative cost profile: estimated low single-digit millions in public reporting for some systems.[52] Strategic use: longer-endurance ISR, payload delivery, deep-water operation and submarine-launched effects.

Extra-large AUVs: Ghost Shark and Orca XLUUV. Indicative cost profile: tens of millions per system or higher depending on program scope, with fleet programs reaching billions.[15][53] Strategic use: long-range ISR, strike, seabed warfare and autonomous undersea deterrence.

The NBN lesson

The National Broadband Network provides a useful domestic analogy, not because telecommunications and submarines are the same, but because both involve long-duration public infrastructure decisions made under conditions of technological uncertainty.

The NBN was designed to solve a real national problem. Its failure was not ambition. Its weakness was that a project conceived around one technological and delivery model became trapped in a long implementation cycle while technology, market behaviour and public expectations continued to evolve.

The lesson for defence is not that governments should avoid large infrastructure projects. The lesson is that the longer the implementation cycle, the more exposed the project becomes to technological change. AUKUS Pillar I carries the same kind of risk at far greater strategic and fiscal consequence.

Australia should avoid imposing asymmetric costs on itself. It should impose asymmetric costs on adversaries. That is the central opportunity cost of the sovereign submarine pathway.

Section 3. Australia's Comparative Security Advantage

If Australia should not pursue the acquisition of sovereign nuclear-powered submarines, the next question is what it should do instead.

The answer should not be framed as a search for a single substitute platform. That would repeat the same conceptual error. The purpose of cancelling the sovereign submarine acquisition pathway is not to replace one exquisite platform with another. It is to reallocate national investment toward a distributed set of capabilities that better reflect Australia's comparative security advantage.

Australia's future defence investment, and its contribution to AUKUS where relevant, should be built around the capabilities it can develop, scale and sustain better than its partners, or in ways that provide disproportionate value to the alliance. These include autonomous maritime systems, cyber and electronic warfare, advanced manufacturing, critical minerals, test and evaluation, northern infrastructure and Indo-Pacific logistics. Australia should also build sovereign irregular warfare, intelligence and economic security capabilities that sit alongside, but not under, AUKUS.

This is not a recommendation to retreat from AUKUS. It is a recommendation to apply AUKUS more coherently.

Australia should specialise, not replicate

AUKUS should not require each partner to build smaller versions of the others' force structures. The United States already possesses the world's most capable nuclear-powered submarine fleet. The United Kingdom possesses advanced submarine design and nuclear stewardship expertise. Australia's role should not be to duplicate these capabilities at great cost and at smaller scale.

Australia should instead specialise in capabilities that are strategically relevant, economically scalable and operationally suited to its geography. The 2024 National Defence Strategy identifies the need for a whole-of-nation approach to defence, including deeper integration between the ADF, government, industry, academia and international partners.[12] The 2026 strategy continues that approach, emphasising self-reliance, industrial resilience, international industrial partnerships, and investment in autonomous and uncrewed systems, cyber, space and resilient communications.[13]

Comparative Security Advantage asks where Australia can produce the highest marginal contribution to allied deterrence. The answer is not sovereign SSN ownership. It is becoming the alliance's leading Indo-Pacific platform for experimentation, autonomous capability, advanced manufacturing and operational sustainment, while building sovereign irregular warfare, intelligence and economic security capabilities under Australian authority.

Autonomous maritime systems

Autonomous maritime systems should sit at the centre of Australia's future AUKUS contribution. Ghost Shark demonstrates a different acquisition logic: rapid development, sovereign industrial participation, iterative improvement, software-defined capability, distributed deployment and lower unit exposure. Australia should treat Ghost Shark as the beginning of a national autonomous maritime ecosystem, not as an isolated acquisition.[15]

A larger Australian autonomous maritime enterprise would combine a diversity of autonomous undersea vehicles, autonomous surface vessels, seabed sensors, undersea communications, AI-enabled maritime surveillance, distributed payloads, autonomous mine warfare, autonomous logistics and integration with crewed allied platforms. Such a force would complicate adversary planning across Australia's northern and western approaches and the archipelagic approaches to Southeast Asia.

Special operations, intelligence and regional expertise

Australia's special operations and intelligence capabilities should also be treated as areas of comparative security advantage. Australia has a mature National Intelligence Community, including ASIS, ASIO, ASD, AGO, DIO and ONI, along with wider national security partners.[20] ASD already supports Australian Government and Defence operations through intelligence, cyber security and offensive cyber capabilities.[21]

Australia also has a highly developed special operations capability. ASPI's work on special operations described Australian Special Operations Forces as a versatile military option for government, suited to missions that conventional forces cannot undertake, including sensitive operations and short-notice tasks.[22] More recent ASPI work on unconventional deterrence argues that Australia should develop asymmetric and emergent methods of deterrence capable of being fielded faster than major traditional platforms.[23]

This submission agrees, but would go further. Australia should develop a national special operations and intelligence ecosystem as a principal sovereign capability. It should operate alongside, but not under, AUKUS. That ecosystem should integrate special operations, human intelligence, signals intelligence, geospatial intelligence, cyber operations, electronic warfare, influence capabilities, space-enabled reconnaissance, autonomous systems and AI-enabled analysis, while maintaining a defined interface with the separate national economic security capability proposed later in this submission.

In a region defined by grey-zone coercion, economic pressure, cyber intrusions, maritime militia activity, foreign interference and coercive statecraft, those capabilities are not peripheral. They are central.

Critical minerals, advanced manufacturing and guided weapons

Australia's critical minerals sector is another clear area of comparative security advantage. The Australian Government's Critical Minerals Strategy 2023-2030 sets out a national framework to grow Australia's critical minerals sector, diversify supply chains and support clean energy, advanced manufacturing and defence-relevant technologies.[24] In an era of economic warfare, supply-chain control is national power.

Australia should link its critical minerals strategy directly to AUKUS industrial integration. It should seek not only to extract critical minerals, but to develop sovereign and allied processing, component manufacturing and defence-relevant supply chains. This would allow Australia to contribute to alliance resilience in a way that cannot be easily replicated by either the United States or the United Kingdom.

Australia should also focus on guided weapons and advanced manufacturing. The Australian Guided Weapons and Explosive Ordnance Plan is intended to strengthen Australia's guided weapons stockpiles, supply chains and domestic manufacturing capability.[25] A sovereign submarine fleet does little to solve Australia's munitions depth problem. A strengthened guided weapons and manufacturing ecosystem does.

Test, evaluation and northern infrastructure

Australia's geography is itself a strategic capability. Defence describes the Woomera Prohibited Area as approximately 122,000 square kilometres, about the size of England, and the largest land-based test range in the Western world.[26] In a period when advanced weapons, autonomous systems, hypersonics, electronic warfare and space-enabled capabilities require realistic testing environments, this matters.

Northern and Western Australia are also central to allied access, sustainment and projection into the Indo-Pacific. If SRF-West makes Western Australia the alliance's undersea sustainment hub, northern Australia can become the broader AUKUS operational experimentation and logistics hub. It can support distributed basing, autonomous systems, special operations, intelligence collection, maritime surveillance, stockpiling, fuel resilience, repair, communications and Indo-Pacific partner engagement.

The central insight is that geography is not passive. Properly developed, it is an active form of strategic leverage.

Section 4. AUKUS as a trusted defence industrial environment

The greatest unrealised value of AUKUS is not the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines. It is the creation of a trusted defence industrial environment across Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

This should not be framed as a general trade liberalisation project. That language is politically unhelpful and strategically imprecise. AUKUS should instead be understood as a controlled national-security production, technology and innovation environment among trusted allies.

The purpose is not to remove all barriers. The purpose is to remove the wrong barriers: those that prevent trusted companies, universities, laboratories, investors and government agencies from collaborating at the speed required by contemporary strategic competition.

This should also be made more transparent. The public has heard that AUKUS will create jobs and industrial opportunity. It has heard far less about the mechanisms that would actually move Australian firms into trusted allied supply chains. If AUKUS is to command social licence, the industrial bargain must be explained in practical terms: who produces what, where supply-chain gaps exist, which Australian firms and workers benefit, and how public money converts into usable capability.

The United States Department of Defense describes AUKUS as a partnership intended to promote deeper information and technology sharing, and to foster deeper integration of security and defence-related science, technology, industrial bases and supply chains.[27] Australia's Department of Defence describes AUKUS Pillar II as a capability-sharing partnership focused on accelerating advanced capabilities and the ability of AUKUS militaries to operate together.[28] Those statements point to a larger implication. If AUKUS is to succeed, it cannot remain primarily a platform acquisition arrangement. It must become a mechanism for allied industrial integration.

The licence-free environment is a proof of concept

Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States have already begun building this model through the AUKUS licence-free environment. Australia's Department of Defence states that the licence-free environment exempts certain Defence and Strategic Goods List goods, technology and services from permit requirements when transferring between Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom.[29] Defence states that its purpose is to revolutionise the speed and scale of defence collaboration, unlock scientific, technological and industrial cooperation and co-development, and maximise the value of collective resources and talent across AUKUS.[29]

The United States has made corresponding reforms. The US Commerce Department reduced export licensing requirements for Australia and the United Kingdom under the Export Administration Regulations. Reuters reported that these streamlined controls reduced licensing requirements for exports to Australia and the UK by 80 percent, or more than US\$7.5 billion annually.[30] The United States Studies Centre has assessed the broader reform package as a significant step toward harmonising export-control regulations among AUKUS countries.[31]

This is already a form of allied industrial integration. It should now become the central project of AUKUS.

The NTIB should become an operating system, not a slogan

The United States already has a statutory concept that points in this direction: the National Technology and Industrial Base. Under 10 USC 4801, the NTIB includes persons and organisations engaged in research, development, production, integration, services or information technology activities conducted within the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.[32]

That matters more than is usually acknowledged. Australia is not asking to be treated as a generic foreign supplier. Australia is already inside the statutory definition of the US national technology and industrial base. The problem is that the concept has not been fully operationalised.

USSC has described the NTIB as one of the most available but underutilised instruments for alliance integration, constrained by outdated regulatory measures, acquisition processes, protectionist instincts, bureaucratic inertia and distrust of multilateralism.[33] That assessment is correct. AUKUS can provide the political energy and strategic urgency that the NTIB has lacked.

The policy objective should therefore be practical: turn the NTIB from a legal definition into an operating system for trusted allied production. That means common accreditation, aligned export controls, faster technology release, trusted capital, joint procurement, shared requirements, common standards, supply-chain resilience, reciprocal industrial security and coordinated production planning.

DPA Title III should be explored as a companion to AUKUS

The NTIB should also be examined alongside the Defense Production Act, especially Title III. Title III authorises the United States President to create, maintain, protect, expand or restore domestic industrial base capabilities essential for national defence, including by purchase commitments, support for exploration and mining of critical and strategic materials, and development of production capabilities.[34]

This is directly relevant to Australia. The FY24 National Defense Authorization Act expanded the definition of domestic source for DPA purposes to include business concerns performing substantially all relevant research, development, engineering, manufacturing and production activities in Australia or the United Kingdom, subject to limitations and where the matter cannot be fully addressed by US or Canadian sources.[35] GAO has similarly noted that Congress broadened the definition of domestic source for Title III to include companies in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom under certain conditions.[36]

The implication is significant. AUKUS can be supported by a US legal mechanism that already recognises Australian and UK firms as domestic sources for certain defence production purposes. This should be treated as a companion to AUKUS, not a footnote to it.

This matters for social licence because it gives AUKUS a more concrete economic rationale. If Australian firms can be treated as part of the trusted allied industrial base for selected purposes, then AUKUS is not merely a cost centre or a submarine purchase. It can become a mechanism for building Australian production capacity in areas that matter to deterrence and economic resilience.

Australia should recommend a deeper joint examination of how NTIB and DPA Title III authorities can be used to create a full-cycle supply-chain solution. This should include critical minerals, rare earths processing, energetics, batteries, semiconductors, advanced materials, autonomous systems, secure communications, undersea components, sensors, additive manufacturing, repair, sustainment and stewardship infrastructure. The goal should not be symbolic market access. The goal should be trusted allied production from raw material to finished capability, through sustainment, disposal and regeneration.

In practical terms, Australia should seek to ensure that Australian companies can be considered for DPA Title III and related industrial-base programs where they fill a genuine allied supply-chain gap. That would allow AUKUS to move beyond technology sharing into production capacity, the point at which deterrence becomes economically credible.

Secure allied production, not trade liberalisation

AUKUS should avoid being framed as a trade agreement. That framing invites unnecessary political resistance, especially in the United States, where broad trade liberalisation is contested and where domestic manufacturing politics remain powerful.

The better frame is secure allied production. That frame emphasises faster capability delivery, larger trusted production capacity, resilient supply chains, burden sharing, defence industrial mobilisation, reduced dependence on adversarial supply chains, accelerated innovation, interoperability and shared deterrence.

This is not open trade. It is controlled production inside a trusted national-security perimeter. The distinction matters. The objective is not to expose sensitive defence markets to general competition. The objective is to allow security-screened firms and institutions to collaborate more easily to solve shared military and industrial problems.

Pillar II is better suited to industrial integration than Pillar I

AUKUS Pillar I has dominated public attention because nuclear-powered submarines are expensive, complex and politically controversial. However, the industrial integration logic of AUKUS is better suited to Pillar II. Pillar II covers fields such as quantum, advanced cyber, electronic warfare, undersea warfare, autonomy and artificial intelligence, and hypersonics and counter-hypersonics.[28] These fields are characterised by rapid technological change, commercial overlap, software-enabled capability, venture-backed innovation and distributed expertise across universities, startups, primes and government laboratories.

Australia's Department of Defence states that the AUKUS Innovation Challenge Series enables governments, industry and academia across the three nations to co-design solutions to joint operational problems. The 2025 challenge focused on undersea communications and control of autonomous systems.[37] The AUKUS partners have also conducted Maritime Big Play experimentation involving communications with uncrewed underwater vehicles.[38] This is the practical model AUKUS should deepen.

Recommendation for Section 4

The Inquiry should recommend that Australia use AUKUS to establish a trusted defence industrial environment with the United Kingdom and the United States. That environment should expand the licence-free environment, operationalise the NTIB, incorporate DPA Title III where legally available, support trusted entity accreditation, enable common procurement pathways, align security standards, map supply-chain vulnerabilities and create an AUKUS full-cycle supply-chain solution from raw materials to operational sustainment. This industrial agenda should remain institutionally distinct from Australia's sovereign irregular warfare, intelligence and economic security reforms. AUKUS can provide technology, production and interoperability enablers. It should not be turned into an omnibus national-security architecture or treated as the source of Australian operational authority.

Section 5. A sovereign national irregular warfare and intelligence enterprise

Australia's Comparative Security Advantage is not limited to technology, geography and industrial capacity. It also lies in access, understanding, trust, influence and the ability to operate effectively in the region that matters most to Australia's security: Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

Australia should build a potent National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise as a sovereign national capability and as a direct alternative investment to sovereign SSN acquisition. It should not be placed under AUKUS. AUKUS does not provide Australia with operational authority, a trilateral command architecture or political consent for irregular warfare activity. Nor does Australia require allied authorisation to align ASIS, Special Operations Command, ASD, AGO, DIO, ASIO and ONI against Australian strategic priorities under Australian law.

The enterprise should integrate special operations, foreign intelligence, signals intelligence, geospatial intelligence, cyber operations, electronic warfare, regional diplomacy, partner capacity-building, strategic communications, autonomous systems and AI-enabled analysis. Its purpose would not be to militarise Australian foreign policy or create an unaccountable covert apparatus. It would be to build a lawful, strategically directed and regionally expert national capability able to generate warning, access, influence and deterrent effect below the threshold of conventional conflict.

AUKUS can enable the enterprise without governing it

AUKUS remains relevant because Pillar II may provide technologies that improve Australian capability, including secure communications, autonomy, artificial intelligence, cyber tools, electronic warfare and undersea sensing. Those technologies should be available to Australian agencies and forces where their use is lawful, necessary and operationally relevant.

The command, intelligence priorities, liaison relationships and regional activities of the enterprise must nevertheless remain Australian. Cooperation with United States and United Kingdom irregular warfare and intelligence communities can occur through existing bilateral, Five Eyes, military and intelligence arrangements. Nothing in this submission implies that AUKUS authorises Australian influence operations or requires the creation of a trilateral irregular warfare command.

Keeping these lines clear strengthens both arguments. AUKUS remains understandable as a defence technology and industrial partnership. The National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise remains a sovereign Australian reform, able to act where Australian interests require and not dependent on allied approval or exposed to unnecessary allied constraint.

The region is not an operating environment. It is Australia's strategic home

Australia's defence debate often treats Southeast Asia and the Pacific as an operating environment through which forces move. That does not encompass Australia's reality. These regions shape Australia's trade, fuel security, migration patterns, air and maritime routes, diplomatic options, intelligence requirements and exposure to coercion.

Australia's security will not be determined only by what occurs in the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea or the Indian Ocean. It will also be determined by whether Australia has trusted relationships, reliable access, resilient networks and deep understanding across Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and the wider Pacific family.

AUKUS can help Australia build military and technological power. It cannot substitute for regional knowledge. The answer is not to expand AUKUS into a regional operational authority. It is to ensure that Australia does not mistake allied technology integration for an Australian regional strategy.

ASIS should be central to Australia's Comparative Security Advantage

ASIS should be central to this model. Publicly, ASIS describes its role as human intelligence collection overseas to protect Australian interests, working alongside partners in Australia's National Intelligence Community.[39] This is a rare and strategically valuable sovereign capability.

The Intelligence Services Act 2001 provides the statutory basis for ASIS's functions. Those functions include obtaining intelligence about the capabilities, intentions or activities of people or organisations outside Australia in accordance with government requirements, communicating such intelligence, undertaking counter-intelligence activities, liaising with intelligence or security services or authorities of other countries, and providing assistance to the Defence Force in support of military operations and cooperating with the Defence Force on intelligence matters.[40]

This statutory architecture matters. It already provides a lawful basis for ASIS to support Australian strategic objectives overseas, including in cooperation with Defence. The issue is not whether ASIS should be pulled into military activity outside its remit. It should not. The issue is whether parts of Australia's special operations capability should be more closely aligned with, informed by and integrated around ASIS's lawful foreign intelligence remit and functions, under ministerial direction and oversight, to generate better national effects in competition short of war.

That integration should be deliberate and disciplined. Special operations can provide military options, partner engagement, reconnaissance, crisis response, operational preparation and small-footprint presence. ASIS can provide foreign human access, secret intelligence, liaison, counter-intelligence insight and an understanding of decision-making that technical collection may not reveal. ASD, AGO, DIO, ASIO and ONI can add signals intelligence, geospatial intelligence, assessment, cyber capabilities and protective security. The point is not to collapse distinct legal authorities into one organisation. It is to align them against the same strategic problems.

The enterprise should maintain a formal intelligence and warning interface with the separate national economic security and economic warfare capability proposed in Section 6. It should not own whole-of-government economic policy or subordinate economic agencies to an intelligence or military structure.

How the enterprise generates deterrence

The National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise is not a one-for-one replacement for the long-range kinetic capability of an SSN. It is one part of the alternative portfolio. Its value lies in creating effects that submarines cannot and in multiplying autonomous systems, long-range strike, cyber, electronic warfare and allied conventional forces.

It would generate deterrence through linked effects: earlier warning, clearer attribution, stronger access, greater partner resilience, more options for government and a reduced prospect that an adversary can achieve a quick or ambiguous gain. The examples below are illustrative and do not imply any current operation or authority.

Strategic pressure	Integrated Australian response	Deterrence effect
Maritime grey-zone coercion and militia activity	ASIS, AGO and ASD warning; partner liaison; persistent autonomous surveillance; and SOF-enabled partner capacity.	Reduces ambiguity, exposes coercion earlier and makes a rapid fait accompli harder to achieve.
Strategic access and crisis preparation	ASIS liaison, long-term SOF relationships, agreed access, reconnaissance and logistics planning.	Expands Australian options, speeds response and complicates adversary planning.
Cyber and technology penetration	ASD, ASIO, Defence and industry counter-intelligence, network defence and rapid technical support.	Reduces the payoff from espionage and protects critical and AUKUS-relevant technology.

Strategic pressure	Integrated Australian response	Deterrence effect
Coercive finance and strategic infrastructure pressure	NIWIE intelligence feeds the separate economic security capability; DFAT, Treasury and AUSTRAC develop partner options.	Provides earlier warning, preserves partner choice and raises the cost of covert leverage.
Influence, elite capture and disinformation	Human intelligence, financial analysis, partner transparency support and lawful strategic communications.	Exposes concealed activity, reduces influence returns and strengthens political resilience.
High-end contingency	Intelligence-led reconnaissance, cyber and electronic warfare, autonomous systems and long-range strike cueing.	Multiplies conventional and allied forces and increases adversary uncertainty.

The enterprise would shape the environment before crisis, expand government options during crisis and improve conventional effects during conflict. Its contribution is cumulative and networked rather than platform-for-platform. It should be assessed alongside the distributed maritime denial force, not as a solitary substitute for it.

Special operations should be reoriented toward regional strategic effect

Australian Special Operations Forces should be integrated more closely with ASIS and the broader intelligence enterprise, consistent with the Intelligence Services Act, Defence authorities and ministerial oversight. Properly used, Special Operations Forces are not simply elite tactical units. They are strategic instruments.

They can build partner capacity, develop access, conduct reconnaissance, support crisis response, enable targeting, support information activities, assist in counter-coercion and operate in politically sensitive environments where conventional force packages are too visible or too blunt. In competition short of war, they can help Australia impose uncertainty, complicate coercion, strengthen partners and detect emerging threats earlier.

This is not a substitute for conventional defence. It is a force multiplier. It is also a more immediate and scalable contribution to deterrence by denial than waiting decades for sovereign nuclear-powered submarines.

Regional expertise should be treated as a national capability

Australia should treat Southeast Asia and Pacific expertise as a national security capability. This is not only a matter for DFAT. It should be a whole-of-government priority, supported by Defence, the intelligence community, universities, industry, development agencies, law enforcement and the private sector.

Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040 states that Southeast Asia is central to Australia's economic future.[41] Defence's regional engagement programs support security relationships across Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, the South West Pacific and Southeast Asia.[42] These are not separate from defence strategy. They are part of defence strategy.

Regional expertise should be built deliberately through language training, country specialisation, regional fellowships, secondments, analytic exchanges, diaspora engagement pathways, partner liaison and longer-term regional career tracks across Defence, DFAT and the intelligence community. A country that spends hundreds of billions of dollars on submarines but lacks deep understanding of its immediate neighbourhood has not solved its strategic problem.

Public licence, secrecy and oversight

A national irregular warfare and intelligence enterprise will require public confidence. Australians generally understand that ASIS and Special Operations Forces operate in sensitive environments and that some activities must remain secret. That does not mean public licence can be assumed.

Separating the enterprise from AUKUS makes the public explanation cleaner. The question is why Australia needs a sovereign capability, what legal authorities apply, how ministerial control and oversight operate,

what regional partnership principles will guide it, and where its boundaries lie. The public should not be asked to accept that AUKUS has somehow authorised influence or covert operations. It has not.

The Government should begin with an unclassified Green Paper setting out purpose, legal basis, governance, oversight and limits, followed by parliamentary review and a published government response. That process should not disclose operations, methods, identities or sources. It should explain the roles of the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security and the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security,[45][46] and provide enough detail for Australians to understand why the enterprise is necessary and how it will remain accountable.

Recommendation for Section 5

The Inquiry should recommend that Australia establish a National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise as a sovereign national reform and a central alternative investment to sovereign nuclear-powered submarines, not as an AUKUS institution. It should strengthen ASIS as Australia's principal foreign human intelligence capability, integrate special operations more closely with ASIS's lawful remit under the Intelligence Services Act 2001, expand regional language and country expertise, use AUKUS-developed technologies where useful without importing AUKUS governance, maintain a defined interface with the separate economic security capability, and begin with a public Green Paper and parliamentary review.

Section 6. Economic warfare as a sovereign national security capability

Australia should treat economic warfare as a whole-of-government national security capability in its own right. It should not be subordinate to AUKUS and it should not be housed inside the National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise.

AUKUS is a trilateral defence technology and industrial partnership. The National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise is a sovereign intelligence and special operations reform. Economic warfare crosses Treasury, DFAT, Defence, Home Affairs, Industry, Austrade, AUSTRAC, the intelligence community, regulators and the private sector. Its scope is wider than either structure.

Separating the capability is strategically important. Australia must be able to identify and counter economic coercion regardless of the future course of AUKUS, and it must be able to work with partners beyond the trilateral, including Southeast Asian and Pacific states, Japan, the Republic of Korea, India, the European Union, Canada and New Zealand. AUKUS industrial integration is one instrument of national economic security. It is not the governing framework for it.

Context Box: Economic Warfare and China's Industrial Strategy

This submission uses the term **economic warfare** descriptively, not rhetorically. It refers to the deliberate use of economic instruments such as industrial policy, market access, supply-chain leverage, technology controls, subsidies, standards-setting, coercive trade measures, investment restrictions, financial pressure and control of critical inputs to gain strategic advantage over competitors.

The Chinese Communist Party does not usually describe its approach as economic warfare. Its formal language is framed around national rejuvenation, economic security, technological self-reliance, industrial upgrading and national security. However, the practical effect is sustained state-directed competition for economic and technological advantage.

China's official policy documents make this clear. Made in China 2025 describes manufacturing as the foundation of a world power and sets out the ambition for China to become a manufacturing powerhouse that leads the development of the global manufacturing industry by the centenary of the People's Republic of China in 2049.[17] The 20th Party Congress report similarly calls for China to accelerate self-reliance and strength in science and technology, concentrate resources on breakthroughs in core technologies and strengthen the role of enterprises in innovation.[18]

China's dual circulation strategy also reflects this logic. CSIS describes dual circulation as a strategy intended to shield China from global volatility and promote greater self-reliance.[19]

None of this requires inflammatory language. It does, however, require strategic clarity. China is using industrial policy, technology policy, supply-chain control and market scale as instruments of national power. Whether Australia describes this as economic warfare, geoeconomic competition or state-directed industrial strategy, the policy implication is the same: Australia and its allies must compete economically as well as militarily.

For Australia, the policy implication is broader than AUKUS. AUKUS can contribute through trusted industrial integration, technology sharing and resilient supply chains, but economic security must be organised as a sovereign whole-of-government capability that can also work with regional and global partners outside the trilateral partnership.

What the capability should do

The capability should maintain a national map of strategic dependencies and coercive leverage, provide early warning of supply-chain pressure and coercive finance, protect critical technology and research, and develop practical alternatives for Australian and partner governments before a dependency becomes a crisis.

It should also develop coordinated options across investment screening, procurement, export controls, financial intelligence, sanctions, standards, market access, industrial policy and partner support. The purpose is not to centralise every economic decision inside the national security system. It is to ensure that departments see the same strategic picture and can act before economic pressure has already produced a political or security outcome.

The National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise would contribute intelligence, access and warning. Economic departments would retain authority for economic policy and instruments. This division preserves legal clarity while ensuring that intelligence is converted into actionable economic statecraft.

Governance and public licence

The Government should adopt a National Economic Security Strategy and establish a small coordinating office in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, supported by a standing interdepartmental mechanism. It should produce an annual unclassified National Economic Security Assessment, with a classified annex for government, and regularly exercise coercion scenarios with industry and regional partners.

Public explanation should emphasise resilience, sovereign choice and defence against coercion. Economic warfare should not become a vague licence for market manipulation or punitive action without clear legal authority. The Government should explain the objectives, decision-making process, safeguards and parliamentary accountability that apply to the use of economic instruments for national security purposes.

Relationship to AUKUS

AUKUS has an important but bounded role. The licence-free environment, the NTIB, DPA Title III, critical-minerals cooperation and allied supply-chain planning can strengthen the economic security capability. They should be treated as tools within a wider national strategy, not as the institutional home of that strategy.

This separation makes the proposal more durable. The capability can proceed if AUKUS changes, and it can support cooperation with countries that are strategically important to Australia but are not AUKUS members.

Recommendation for Section 6

The Inquiry should recommend that Australia establish a sovereign whole-of-government economic security and economic warfare capability, independent of AUKUS and institutionally separate from the National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise. It should be coordinated at the centre of government, informed by the intelligence community, implemented through the departments that hold the relevant economic authorities, and connected to AUKUS only where the partnership provides useful industrial, technology or supply-chain tools.

Section 7. Recommendations and conclusion

This submission does not recommend that Australia abandon AUKUS. It recommends that Australia stop treating AUKUS as if its purpose is already settled and its public mandate is already secured.

The core strategic judgement is that Australia has already secured the most important operational effect of AUKUS Pillar I through SRF-West. The marginal question is not whether Australia should participate in AUKUS. It should. The question is whether Australia should proceed with the additional acquisition of sovereign nuclear-powered submarines without a clearer public explanation of purpose, cost, alternatives and social licence. This submission concludes that it should not.

Recommendations

1. **Preserve AUKUS, but reframe it publicly.** AUKUS remains a strategically valuable partnership. It should be explained as a trusted allied defence technology, production and industrial partnership rather than as a synonym for sovereign submarine ownership.
2. **Discontinue the sovereign SSN acquisition pathway.** Australia should not proceed with buying, building, crewing, maintaining and regulating its own sovereign nuclear-powered submarine fleet. This recommendation does not end AUKUS, SRF-West or undersea cooperation. It ends the highest-risk and lowest-fit element of the current pathway.
3. **Preserve and expand SRF-West.** SRF-West should remain Australia's principal AUKUS Pillar I mechanism for allied undersea deterrence from Australian territory. It should continue to drive infrastructure, workforce development, nuclear stewardship and allied sustainment in Western Australia.
4. **Develop AUKUS Stewardship Infrastructure.** Australia should build a stewardship model for SRF-West covering waste classification, transport, custody, environmental assurance, emergency preparedness, public reporting and community confidence. Tellus Sandy Ridge should be examined as one Australian option for the low-level radioactive waste component, while maintaining a clear distinction between low-level operational waste, spent fuel and high-level waste.
5. **Secure reinvestment before relying on it.** The Government should establish a Comparative Security Advantage Reinvestment Plan that identifies sunk costs, cancellable commitments and future avoided expenditure, and provides separately identified multi-year appropriations for the replacement capability portfolio. Cancellation and the first funded replacement tranches should be announced together.
6. **Redirect investment toward distributed maritime denial.** Secured funding should support autonomous undersea and surface systems, seabed sensors, undersea communications, long-range strike, guided weapons, space-enabled surveillance, cyber and electronic warfare, resilient logistics and dispersed basing.
7. **Establish a sovereign National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise through public engagement.** The enterprise should be centred on ASIS, Special Operations Command and the National Intelligence Community, with a regional focus on Southeast Asia and the Pacific. It should operate under Australian law and direction, not AUKUS governance, and should be developed through an unclassified Green Paper and parliamentary review.
8. **Establish a separate national economic security and economic warfare capability.** The capability should be whole-of-government, coordinated at the centre of government and able to operate independently of both AUKUS and the National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise.
9. **Operationalise the NTIB and DPA Title III as AUKUS enablers.** Australia should work with the United States and United Kingdom to convert the NTIB and DPA Title III domestic-source provisions into practical mechanisms for allied production, supply-chain resilience and full-cycle capability development.

10. Make Australia the AUKUS test, evaluation and experimentation hub. Australia should use its geography, ranges, maritime approaches and northern and western infrastructure to become the principal AUKUS environment for autonomous systems, electronic warfare, undersea communications, AI-enabled command systems and long-range strike.

11. Create an independent and ongoing AUKUS Investment Review. The review should test major AUKUS expenditure against Comparative Security Advantage and certify implementation of the reinvestment plan, including cost, time to capability, workforce impact, industrial resilience, strategic effect, adaptability, opportunity cost and public explanation.

12. Publish a transition and social licence plan. The Government should explain how Australia would preserve AUKUS and SRF-West while discontinuing sovereign SSN acquisition, how funds would be secured and redirected, which communities and industries would be affected, and how the distinct purposes of AUKUS, the National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise and the economic security capability will be explained to voters.

Implementation pathway

The transition should occur in three phases. In the first year, Australia should announce that it will preserve AUKUS and SRF-West while conducting an orderly discontinuation of the sovereign SSN acquisition pathway. The same announcement should publish a financial baseline distinguishing sunk costs, cancellable commitments and future avoided expenditure; establish the Comparative Security Advantage Reinvestment Plan; appropriate the first replacement capability tranches; protect HMAS Stirling infrastructure investment; and begin allied and workforce consultation.

Over the following one to three years, Australia should field capabilities that can be delivered faster and scaled more widely. These should include Ghost Shark and related autonomous maritime systems, guided weapons and munitions, cyber and electronic warfare, northern and western infrastructure, and Pillar II test and evaluation programs. In parallel, Australia should develop the National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise through its own Green Paper and parliamentary process, and establish the separate national economic security capability through a whole-of-government strategy.

Over three to ten years, Australia should mature three parallel but connected tracks: an industrially integrated AUKUS focused on trusted technology, production and supply chains; a sovereign Australian force structure built around distributed maritime denial and a regionally expert irregular warfare and intelligence enterprise; and a national economic security capability able to resist coercion and support partner resilience. The result would be clearer authority, stronger public legitimacy and a more adaptable national security system than an AUKUS framework asked to carry all three functions.

Conclusion

Australia faces a generational defence choice. The question is not whether nuclear-powered submarines are capable platforms. They are. The question is whether Australia should commit the largest defence acquisition in its history to sovereign ownership of those platforms when the core strategic effect of allied undersea deterrence is already being delivered through SRF-West.

This submission argues that Australia should not.

Australia should preserve AUKUS. It should preserve and expand SRF-West. It should deepen defence industrial integration with the United States and the United Kingdom. It should continue to invest seriously in deterrence by denial. But it should not ask Australians to accept the sovereign SSN pathway as an inevitability simply because it has already acquired political momentum.

The case for an alternative does not rest on the assumption that the full \$367.6 billion estimate will suddenly become available. It rests on securing a defined share of future avoided expenditure through a transparent,

multi-year reinvestment plan and funding replacement capabilities at the same time as the SSN pathway is discontinued.

The alternative also does not require AUKUS to become something it is not. AUKUS should remain a trusted technology, industrial and operational-sustainment partnership. The National Irregular Warfare and Intelligence Enterprise should be a sovereign Australian capability under Australian law. Economic security and economic warfare should be organised as a separate whole-of-government function. Each will be stronger if its purpose and authority are clear.

The secured resources should be invested in Australia's Comparative Security Advantage: autonomous systems, guided weapons, cyber, electronic warfare, critical minerals, advanced manufacturing, test and evaluation, regional expertise, Indo-Pacific logistics, ASIS and the National Intelligence Community, and the sovereign capabilities required to understand and resist economic coercion.

This would make Australia safer sooner. It would make Australia more valuable to its allies. It would create a more resilient defence industrial base. It would generate more scalable jobs and infrastructure. It would better align with Australia's geography and strategic circumstances. It would impose greater uncertainty and cost on adversaries. It would also give Australian taxpayers a clearer account of what AUKUS is for, what sits outside it and why each commitment is worth making.

The real promise of AUKUS is not that Australia may one day own nuclear-powered submarines. It is that Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States can build a trusted defence technology, production and supply-chain ecosystem capable of out-innovating and out-producing authoritarian competitors. That promise requires more than ministerial communiques. It requires public explanation, industrial detail and a credible account of what Australian taxpayers are buying.

Australia should lead that effort. It should do so not by imitating the force structures of larger allies or by expanding AUKUS into an all-purpose security architecture, but by contributing what only Australia can: regional access, strategic geography, autonomous capability, intelligence depth, trusted infrastructure, critical minerals, operational experimentation and sovereign judgement about how best to defend its interests.

That is the future AUKUS should pursue.

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