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[redacted]

To: Committee Secretary and Members
Joint Standing Committee on Treaties
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Subject: Inquiry into the AUK Treaty: Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland on Nuclear-Powered Submarine Partnership and Collaboration.

Dear Secretary, Chair, and Members:

Summary

The proposed AUK Treaty is an insult and a burden to all future generations of Australians, by locking Australia into a high-risk, multi-century, unaffordable, nuclear program with no end-of-life plan for Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) reactors and wastes. It would cost A$268–368 billion or more over 30 years; depend on crisis-ridden UK (and US) submarine building industries; and undermine democratic processes and protections. A dangerous non-proliferation precedent and political pressure would damage Pacific and Asian regional political stability.

Australia would inherit permanent responsibility for nuclear wastes and decommissioning submarines. The UK has failed to successfully manage these processes for 45 years. A June 2025 report notes that a Royal Navy nuclear submarine is being scrapped for the first time, with work expected to be completed by the end of 2026. Including this sub, the former HMS Swiftsure, the Royal Navy has a backlog of 23 retired nuclear-powered subs all in need of disposal.

The Committee must recommend cancellation of the Treaty. If it proceeds, despite all our warnings, at a minimum the agreement should be postponed until fianlisation of international safeguards, permanent nuclear waste plans and proven technologies, full costings for this and future generations of Australians, and ongoing open and transparent participation in planning and consultations for the interested public and independent experts.

The arrangement would:

- Create a dangerous potential nuclear proliferation precedent by withdrawing weapons-grade material from IAEA safeguards under an as-yet non-existent, unresolved, and unprecedented “Article 14 arrangement”.

- Breach democratic norms: no public participation or consultation, limited parliamentary oversight, and secrecy clauses that diminish and delay accountability to the public and the parliament.
- Lock Australia into a multi-decade, high-risk nuclear program with no credible end-of-life plans for highly enriched uranium reactors, weapons-grade nuclear wastes, and obsolete submarines.
- Cost at least A$268–368 over 30 years i.e. >$30 billion/year, diverting funds from other immediately urgent and soluble defense and civil society priorities.
- Depend on US and UK submarine building industries already in crisis, that are suffering massive delays, cost blowouts, and overruns, that Australia has already helped to prop up with $1.6 billion, and more owed.
- Expose Australia to regional instability: Indonesia, Malaysia and Pacific leaders warn AUK would undermine nuclear-free norms agreed under the Rarotonga Treaty, risks a regional arms race, and high-risk instability.
- Commit Australia to hosting permanent high-level nuclear waste dumps, with the defence establishment already assessing various dump sites (including Woomera) and preparing to override state laws and indigenous land rights.
- Deepen technical, industrial and operational interoperability with the UK (and USA), which is inimical to increasing community calls for Australian independence and autonomy. Though the arrangement is not a NATO-style “consider an attack upon one as an attack against all” commitment, it would still propel us into other people’s wars, similar to many of those fought in the past.

The Committee must recommend that the AUK Treaty not be ratified but, as a minimum, ratification of the treaty must await:

1. An Article 14 safeguards system that is published, tested, approved by the IAEA Board, and debated in the Australian community in a quest for a social licence.
2. Credible, fully-funded and tested, and logistically sound plans and technologies for decommissioning reactors and submarines, comprehensive permanent waste management, and inter-generational stewardship for the next 1,000 years, at least.
3. Independent cost/schedule analyses to demonstrate feasibility at all levels and at all phases of the proposals.
4. Full public participation, consultation, and parliamentary scrutiny that are mandated before any final decisions to ratify could be taken.
5. A referendum, which is fully justified considering the short and long-term hazards, risks and costs of the proposal for this and all future generations of Australians.

Objections to AUK

Failed Legitimacy and Transparency

The Government’s National Interest Analysis admits:

> “No public, industry and non-governmental consultation has been undertaken as the Agreement relates to national security and operational capability matters.” (NIA, 2025).

This deliberate exclusion is extraordinary, unacceptable, and egregious, given the multi-generational hazards, risks, and costs that confirming the agreement would involve.

Safeguards and Non-Proliferation Risks

The AUK Treaty envisages Australia— a non-nuclear-weapon state receiving sealed naval reactors containing weapons-grade highly enriched uranium (HEU), removed from normal safeguards, to ensure independent monitoring, compliance, enforcement, and penalties.

The IAEA Director General confirms:

> "The Agency will consider any implications… in the context of the application of Agency safeguards, including through the development of an Article 14 arrangement." (IAEA, 2022).

No such arrangements exist so ratifying and implementing the agreement would set a dangerous precedent that would likely enable further nuclear proliferation.
Instead, Australia has a responsibility to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons as soon as possible and not become a fellow traveler with nuclear weapons states.

Cost, Capacity and Scheduling risks and uncertainties

Estimates place costs at A$268–368 billion (ABC, 2023), with independent economists warning that the cost could blow out A$500 billion (Quiggin, 2023). Yet US submarine construction achieves ~60% of targets and is years behind schedule (GAO, 2023). The UK also has chronic overruns in time and costs which undermines the feasibility and affordability of the scheme before it even begins. John Quiggin concludes:

> "The case for such a massive investment… has proved hard to make… stealth may not endure, and underwater drones and satellites could make our subs obsolete before they are launched."

Sub Decommissioning and Nuclear Waste Liabilities

The UK National Audit Office reports it has "… not yet disposed of any of its 20 retired submarines" and also notes "For the third successive year, the Equipment Plan remains unaffordable." (NAO, 2019).

The ALP's 2021 Platform pledged opposition to importing foreign nuclear waste. Yet under AUK, Australia will permanently host US/UK-origin reactor cores and superseded submarines. Yet Defence has already begun identifying Australian nuclear dump sites (including Woomera) and preparing legislation to override state laws (Noonan, 2024) though no proven or consented nuclear dump sites, even for low and medium level waste, exist. Indigenous peoples' right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent under UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples] is being over-ridden. All future generations of Australians would inherit cost and stewardship liabilities that have no solutions in the foreseeable future and costs that could affect our nation's ability to afford to provide other services.

Secrecy and Accountability Constraints

The Agreement on Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information obliges partners to protect naval propulsion data "including from disclosure to the IAEA" (GOV.UK, 2023). This secrecy would threaten to undermine global non-proliferation security arrangements, contradict openness and transparency claims, and frustrate effective

oversight of the nuclear use and dumping program for centuries to come. This would inevitably leave nothing but a legacy of harm from which all future generations would derive zero benefit.

Strategic Obsolescence and Vulnerability

Emerging submarine detection (e.g. AI-enabled sensor webs, quantum sensing, non-acoustic detection) and attack (e.g. underwater drones and robots) systems threaten submarine stealth and survival already and are likely to proliferate in the 2030s–40s when submarine delivery is proposed (CSBA, IEEE Spectrum, 2022). HMAS Stirling in WA would host submarines, creating vulnerable targets in the event of nuclear or other conflicts. Billions of dollars would be diverted from acquiring cheaper military and civil denial-based capabilities, available now or soon (missiles, drones, ISR), compromising Australian defence capabilities for several decades. The government is also pre-empting strategic decisions by proceeding to build 700 houses for foreign service personnel in WA.

Regional Instability and Treaty of Rarotonga Breach

The South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (Rarotonga) Treaty formalises a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the South Pacific which bans the use, testing, and possession of nuclear weapons within the borders of the zone. Since 1986 it has provided the trust and confidence that the region needs to maintain peace and harmony, and security against the further use of the area for nuclear weapons and other tests suffered in previous decades throughout the Pacific. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pacific Island leaders have warned our government that agreeing to AUK undermines regional nuclear-free norms and risks fuelling an arms race (Pacific Island Forum communiqués, 2022–24). AUK further damages Australia's regional credibility and national security interests.

Summary Recommendations

1. Cancel the AUK Treaty without any compromises or concessions.
2. If not cancelled, suspend AUK ratification until:
    - A comprehensive and foolproof IAEA Article 14 plan has been negotiated, agreed to, and implemented, that is guaranteed not to compromise existing non-proliferation safeguards, surveillance and assurances;
    - Feasible, fully tested, and available technologies exist to ensure that nuclear submarines can be decommissioned and permanently disposed of;
    - that permanent high-level nuclear waste strategies and technologies are available and can be deployed without constraint;
    - independent costings confirm the economic viability of all systems; and
      the facilitation of open, transparent, and full public consultation leading to an agreed social licence is carried out independently, especially with First Nations communities.
3. Redirect investment into denial-centric, sovereign, capabilities that deliver deterrence (missiles, drones, ISR, hardened bases) available and affordable now. Without AUK's delivery problems, decades of delays, escalating costs, and stiff penalties for failure or default.

Conclusions

The Committee must recommend rejecting the AUK Treaty. The AUK Treaty is an immense inter-generational liability which characterises unacceptable secrecy, unmanageable nuclear risks, and enormous unbudgeted costs

that may undermine the nation's revenue and credit rating for centuries to come. It would not strengthen national security, even when the subs were operational, but weakens Australian sovereignty and independence. Australia would be left with permanent, unmanageable, financial and nuclear legacies for which future generations would curse us.

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Appendix A. Summary of UK submarine decommissioning, defueling, and dismantling.

Key facts

20	**19**	**£0.5bn**
out-of-service submarines stored by the Ministry of Defence (the Department)	average number of years submarines out-of-service, against 26 years in-service	estimated total cost to the Department of maintaining retired submarines since 1980 (to 2017)[1]

£96 million	estimated cost to the Department of fully disposing of a submarine[1]
£7.5 billion	Department's future liability for maintaining and disposing of its 20 stored and 10 in-service submarines, as at March 2018

Defueling submarines

11	number of years' delay in re-establishing an ability to defuel submarines, moving from 2012 to a current planning estimate of 2023[2]
57% (£100 million)	budget increase for re-establishing a defueling capability from £175 million (2007) to £275 million (2018)
9	average number of years fuelled submarines have been stored

Dismantling submarines (removing radioactive parts)

15	number of years delay rolling out a tested submarine dismantling approach, moving from 2011 to a current planning estimate of 2026[2]
50% (£0.8 billion)	increase in the cost of the project from £1.6 billion (2002) to £2.4 billion (2016)
£0.9 billion	estimated increase in the Department's longer-term financial liabilities related to submarine dismantling should it take: • six months longer to remove intermediate-level waste from boats dismantled in two stages than the expected 18 months; and • a similar delay dismantling the remaining submarines

Notes

1 Figures estimated based on the average annual cost over the last four years at 2017-18 prices.

2 'Current planning estimate' reflects the Department's current working level assumption, which has not yet been approved by the Departmental Investment Board as it is subject to ongoing scrutiny.