



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

AUKUS has exceeded its initial framework - is it time for its territorial expansion?



The regular annual ministerial consultations of Australia and the US conducted in Brisbane confirmed that their alliance with the UK in the AUKUS coalition has exceeded its original framework, and that its expansion is an open topic.

Expansion from the current "submarine phase" to other forms of technological and security cooperation has been underway, but AUKUS seems prepared to expand geographically as well. Are the others ready for it?

AUKUS, a project to provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines, was founded about two years ago and has thus far accomplished its original goal.

Despite opposition from a group of Republican congressmen who claim it would weaken US security capabilities, Australia will purchase three submarines from the US. Also, together with the UK, Australia will build five nuclear-powered submarines.

The so-called "Pillar 1" is essentially a finished job. It also marked the end of the first stage of AUKUS's development, which set limitations on the participation of other military and technological operations and the participation of other allies in its projects due to its relatively modest goal.

Japan has been viewed from the beginning as the apparent next member of the AUKUS coalition, despite its desire to participate much more in international security initiatives while simultaneously boosting its defence potential.

However, the nuclear component of the current arrangement disqualifies Japan from a more active role in AUKUS activities. For now.

Call for New Zealand

New Zealand is in a similar position regarding potential AUKUS membership, brought to light during last week's Pacific tour by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin.

"The door's very much open for New Zealand and other partners to engage as they see appropriate going forward," said Secretary Blinken in Wellington before leaving for Australia. His invitation was anything but polite because New Zealand and the AUKUS trio view participation in the organisation as a matter of strategic importance.

Due to its anti-nuclear policy, which dates back to the 1980s, New Zealand was not even an option for original membership in the alliance, despite close bonds with the trio, particularly with Australia. But there are many more points of contact, particularly if we consider the direction in which the alliance will advance.

New Zealand has long had a significant security alliance with AUKUS members and Canada as part of the Five Eyes intelligence alliance. Additionally, it shares the same strategic viewpoints as its Western partners regarding security in the Pacific and, in particular, China's disruptive influence in the region. Antony Blinken's remark of an "open door" for New Zealand's AUKUS membership was not just protocol but also well-timed.

Dilemmas regarding joining AUKUS

Parliamentary elections will be held in New Zealand on October 14 in just over two months. Some of the more crucial topics that will determine the votes are security issues, the relationship with China, and, consequently, any potential for forging stronger security alliances with long-standing partners.

Membership in the AUKUS is restricted by close economic links with China, New Zealand's number one trading partner, in addition to the nuclear aspect of the organisation. However, there are also significant aspirations to position the country in the turbulent situation in the Pacific as a more independent Pacific component rather than as a participant in the shared Western confrontation with China.

When Prime Minister Chris Hipkins visited Beijing at the end of June, he signed cooperative agreements in several trade areas and emphasised cooperation in security-related issues, which created dissatisfaction. That is why New Zealand has been getting closer to the point where it will have to end its long-standing strategic ambiguity because the circumstances that allowed it thus far are rapidly changing. Within the framework of AUKUS, a significant new scenario known as "Pillar 2", envisions cooperation between the members (and other partners in the region) in the high-tech sector, understandably within the context of security challenges.

New technologies open the way to partnership

These are non-nuclear arrangements, which therefore do not interfere with New Zealand's policies and concern cyber warfare, the use of AI in security systems, underwater unmanned systems, quantum computing and other advanced technologies.

It will be difficult for New Zealand to resist an invitation to join an alliance that offers access to the most cutting-edge technologies if it wants to continue its active role in the region and its independence in foreign policy, both of which it values.

"Without joining Pillar II, New Zealand's broader strategic, security, and intelligence ties with the AUKUS nations could atrophy. Lacking interoperability with its peers means New Zealand military doctrine will fall out of step", said Reuben Steff, New Zealand university expert.

On the other hand, the new Western strategy in the region, primarily the US strategy, will not be symbolic only but will have a practical significance if New Zealand is included in the AUKUS strategies in the Pacific.

"Washington is now increasingly invested in allies who can pull their own weight and complement U.S. capabilities. At its core,

AUKUS represents a fundamental decision to empower America's key allies and, in doing so, give them increased capacity to play a larger role of their own in Indo-Pacific security", wrote Charles Edel from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies for Foreign Affairs.