

POLITICS

NZ not first in line for Aukus, US says Japan the priority

Dileepa Fonseka | Wed, 24 Apr 2024



Aukus is consulting Japan on whether it wants to join pillar two. (Image: Getty)

As New Zealand contemplates joining a [United States defence alliance](#), the American undersecretary for arms control and international security has laid out a case for the benefits Five Eyes members will get from it.

However, the undersecretary, Bonnie Jenkins, confirmed that Japan was next in line for [Aukus](#) pillar two membership rather than NZ or Canada – the two members of Five Eyes not currently in the alliance.

“Japan will be the first to be consulted [on pillar two]; we recognise Japan’s strength and the close bilateral defence partnerships with Aukus countries; Aukus partners are considering co-operation with Japan in pillar two advanced capability projects.

“We don’t have a timeline for Japan or any other country with which we are consulting about additional partnerships. It is critical we conduct a very deliberate process.”

The undersecretary made the remarks during an online press conference with media in the Asia-Pacific region.

Jenkins said Aukus countries had developed principles and models for incorporating new countries into the alliance and would consider several factors: technological innovation, financing, industrial capacity, ability to protect sensitive data and information adequately, and “impact on promoting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region”.

“Having partners in pillar two was always something which was considered by all three countries, not for pillar one but for pillar two, and we have some criteria that we’re looking at, and we will be engaging countries.

“We don’t have a timeframe in which we’re going to do it, necessarily, but we hope to make some advancements this year.”

Political drama in NZ

Aukus has provoked a fiery political debate at home, with figures on both sides of the political spectrum taking stands against it.

A Labour party event last week saw retired Australian politician Bob Carr deny some of the technology-sharing benefits that could come with Aukus. Instead, technology would be developed in the US and sold to Australia and, potentially, NZ if it were to join.

“Australia and New Zealand will only ever be takers of specialist technology,” Carr said.

The Aukus pact was signed in September 2021 and commits the US and UK to assist Australia to acquire long-range nuclear submarines at a cost estimated between A\$268 billion (NZ\$292.4b) and A\$368b.

So far, the NZ government has said it is continuing discussions on Aukus but has not committed to joining pillar two of the alliance.

During her press conference, Jenkins said Aukus would bring benefits separate from those that came from Five Eyes membership.

“These are emerging technologies in pillar two, I mean, these are things that are developing ... it’s a very exciting prospect to think three countries – and other countries who might be involved – will be developing new technologies together that could be interoperable and connected.

“If we can bring in more countries, they can also benefit from that, they can also share in that, and they can also be part of this interoperability that we have.

“And so it will build on whatever existing relationships that are out there amongst countries who are part of it.”

She said more technology had already been shared between the three Aukus partners than could have been shared under other alliance arrangements.

Retaliation with little upside

Miller said “Five Eyes” partners like NZ or Canada might have assumed they were next on the list for Aukus but this had also potentially been an assumption on their part that they were wanted within the alliance.

He said the other problem was that although words like alliance were often used to describe Aukus it was not a true military alliance.

For starters, there were no mutual security guarantees attached.

Miller said joining Aukus was the "worst of both worlds" because it would inevitably be seen as a provocation by China.

He said it would be viewed this way because Aukus was created to allow Australia to patrol the ocean right up to the Taiwan Strait.

“New Zealand would be taking on a lot of geopolitical risk by joining a defacto alliance, in a sense, without getting those security guarantees in return.”

Miller thought NZ joining Aukus would provoke a reaction from China - most likely in the trade arena - and without any trade guarantees from the US to cushion the blow.

He said in the past countries joining various security arrangements had received trade concessions from the US - Miller pointed to Australia's free trade agreement with the US after the Iraq War or the US agreements with Gulf States.

“I think New Zealanders have become maybe a bit relaxed and complacent and they think that, yes China kicks up a fuss and puts out statements and strong words but nothing actually happens in specific terms.

“I just think it’s really dangerous to just assume that will just remain the case, at some point I do think China will respond with more than just words and I think the point that that would happen would be NZ joining something like Aukus.”

Miller said Aukus was taking over from the Quad (an alliance between India, Japan, Australia and the United States) as the US-preferred military alliance in Asia.

“I think the US has just shown a level of flexibility with all of its partnerships at the moment, they’re willing to explore all kinds of new arrangements.

“Aukus is just one of the balls that they have in the air.”

Miller believed there were divisions within Aukus on how large it should get.

The US wanted to expand Aukus but Australia was less keen and saw expansion as a distraction from the focus on nuclear submarines, he said.

“I don’t think Australia is that keen to see it become an ‘everything pact’.”

'We're not creating new nuclear states'

Jenkins classified the Aukus pillar two as partially a military alliance but also as encompassing a number of other areas, including science and technology cooperation.

“We’ve already started having conversations about universities of the three countries, we’ve been able to train some individuals from Australia in US schools, and so there’s a lot that’s happening in all of Aukus in terms of the steps we’re making in terms of implementing pillar one and pillar two.”

Pillar one of Aukus was largely centred around defence cooperation and Australia’s acquisition of nuclear submarine technology.

Pillar two has been split into several “workstreams”, which current Aukus partners are cooperating on, including cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, undersea capabilities, hypersonic and countersonic capabilities, electronic warfare capabilities, innovation and information sharing.

Work was also taking place within Aukus to develop advanced radar capability in deep space.

Jenkins hit back at “misinformation” that Aukus was enabling nuclear capability in the Pacific.

Several voices in the Pacific, including Cook Islands PM Mark Brown, have said Aukus breaches the Treaty of Rarotonga, which was aimed at reducing the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Pacific.

National party leader Christopher Luxon has previously said he does not believe Aukus breaches the Treaty of Rarotonga. Jenkins did not address the Treaty of Rarotonga directly, simply stating that Aukus did not breach nuclear non-proliferation agreements.

She also said Australia was not being made a nuclear power through the Aukus arrangement and would not be able to use nuclear weapons in its submarines.

“We’re not creating new nuclear weapons; we’re not creating new nuclear states by doing this.”