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SHOULD JAPAN JOIN AUKUS?

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Last month, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the U.K. Parliament recommended that its government support a formal agreement for closer engagement with the second pillar of AUKUS technological defense cooperation in the area of advanced technology development and building military capabilities, with Japan and South Korea in the short term. This recommendation would be welcome from a Japanese security perspective.

Unlike its foreign counterparts, the Japanese defense industry has been grappling with the challenge of financing research and development costs for new weapons systems. Japan maintains a strict weapons export policy, making it difficult to spread the cost of research and development on foreign exports. One of the latest efforts in this regard is the ongoing Japan-U.K.-Italy joint development of a next-generation fighter called “GCAP” (Global Combat Air Programme). Recently, Japan and the U.S. also announced that they would cooperate in the development of a UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle) that will operate alongside the next-generation fighter. Japan has been gradually easing its weapons export restrictions, although it still maintains tight controls. For example, in the ongoing war in Ukraine, Japan firmly supports the Ukrainian government but remains cautious about providing lethal weapons to Ukraine.

The Committee report also suggested that eventually, AUKUS partners might invite Japan to join AUKUS itself, including the first pillar, which involves the sale of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia. However, nuclear-powered submarines would be a very different story for Japan. Unlike South Korea, which has already expressed interest in acquiring such submarines, a significant part of the Japanese population still maintains a strong aversion against anything “nuclear.” Japan continues to monitor radioactive releases from American nuclear-powered warships when they visit Japan. There is a historical precedent of Japan abandoning its civil nuclear-powered ship project after an experimental vessel named Mutsu was found to have released

radioactive waste. The residents of Mutsu port refused the entry of the ship, leading to its eventual abandonment in 1990.

Moreover, unlike Australia, which has to think about defending islands across the vast Pacific Ocean and potential confrontations with China, located far away from Australia, the main task for Japanese submarines is patrolling and defending Japanese military assets in the seas directly surrounding Japan. Japan possesses advanced submarine technology, enabling its subs to remain undersea for extended periods and operate more quietly. In fact, when Australia sought for the next generation of submarines, Japanese manufacturers attempted to sell their advanced conventional submarines but lost the competition to a French manufacturer. This decision was later abandoned when Australia decided to acquire nuclear-powered submarines through the AUKUS agreement.

For Japan, which is currently aiming to increase its defense spending to up to 2 percent of its GDP, it is in its self-interest to reconsider its security arrangements. A particular concern is that Japan's GDP remains stagnant while its competitor, China, continues to experience economic growth. In the current landscape, China's defense spending, which already surpassed that of Japan's towards the end of the last century, continues to grow, exacerbating the existing gap between the two countries.

As Japan contemplates enhancing its security through cooperation with the U.S. and other AUKUS members, it is crucial to pursue such efforts in tandem with initiatives aimed at arms control, risk reduction, and crisis management. Such measures may include nuclear arms control between China and the U.S., risk reduction strategies concerning Taiwan, and mutual identification of nuclear-armed and non-nuclear-armed weapon systems and their respective locations. These initiatives are essential for promoting peace and security in the region as well as the rest of the world.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

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ABOUT APLN

The **Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN)** is a Seoul-based organisation and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.



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