

What is the biggest challenge facing AUKUS?

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An outstanding problem of AUKUS two years after its announcement concerns its relationship to deterrence. Australia's April 2023 [Defence Strategic Review](#) has placed the concept of 'deterrence by denial' at the fulcrum of Australian defence policy. While the agenda for Pillar II of AUKUS could serve deterrence goals, Australia's acquisition of nuclear-propelled attack submarines (SSNs) under Pillar I of the agreement does not appear to be well aligned with such a posture.

This is due to two key issues:

1. The question of how SSNs contribute directly to a strategy of denial is under-specified. A strategy of denial is focused on deterring an action by making it infeasible or unlikely to succeed. This begs the question as to what type of behaviour, and in which geographical contexts, the government of Anthony Albanese, Australian Prime Minister, envisage SSNs playing such a deterrence function?
2. Given the operational benefits of SSNs (e.g. greater range and capacity to stay at sea longer than conventional submarines), they appear more suited to a strategy of deterrence by punishment. Punishment works by [cost imposition](#) – i.e. convincing an adversary that any military action will be met by retaliation severe enough to outweigh the benefits from such action. The focus of deterrence by [punishment](#) is therefore not the direct defence of a contested commitment – say Australia's northern approaches – but 'threats of *wider* punishment that would raise the cost of an attack'.

But is this really the primary deterrence mission which the Albanese government believes SSN acquisitions will fulfil?

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