SUBMISSION TO AUKUS PUBLIC INQUIRY

Background

AUKUS *is a trilateral security understanding and proposed arms deals announced in 2021 involving Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States involving: (a) Nuclear-powered submarines, (b) Hypersonic weapons research, (c) Australian financial transfers to UK and US, and (d) substantial US and UK access to Australian bases.*

The history of AUKUS has been shrouded in secrecy and evasion by successive federal governments. This expensive commitment of almost $400b on behalf of Australians adds to the global arms race and links Australia more closely with US plans for containing China. It distorts budget priorities in favour of open-ended military responses, and ignores the importance of human security. It draws us into a nuclear future with its uncertainties and long-term challenges including nuclear waste disposal.

Quaker Approach

1. Quakers refuse to be enemies and we seek peaceful alternatives to war. We focus on human security which means building relationships in our region and beyond, working with other faith groups, NGOs and politicians to enhance training and resourcing of conflict resolution, nonviolence, and making the arms trade more accountable.
2. Quakers seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. We promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and seeking that of God in every person. We work for justice and to take away the occasion of war.
3. Since the announcement of AUKUS, Quakers nationally have made several public statements. In July 2023 Australian Quakers meeting at their national conference expressed deep concern at trends in Australia's defence policies and particularly the plans for AUKUS. The Quaker statement instead identified the major threats facing humanity as environmental crises, pandemics, and nuclear armaments.
4. Quakers have a number of specific concerns about AUKUS. It commits Australia to offensive strategies rather than territorial defence and stronger diplomatic relationships. It encourages alarmist commentary by officials and media to confront China rather than

supporting positive relations with all countries. It is too closely linked to US global military goals and limits our sovereignty and capacity for independent approaches to resolving conflict and preventing war. It diverts significant funds from the major international threats and pressing domestic priorities.

5. Quakers have a strong tradition of opposing war and seeking to remove its causes. We will continue to work for non-violent approaches to conflict including through dialogue, people-to-people exchanges on language and culture. We re-affirm commitment to the United Nations system and its many conventions and treaties. In particular we urge the Australian Government to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in accordance with agreed Labor Party policy.

AUKUS and the Pacific Region

6. Australia is part of the Pacific region and needs good relations with the other countries of the region. Government ministers are increasingly vocal about their commitment to the Pacific, most recently Chris Bowen in insisting that Pacific voices on climate change are being heard and heeded. The Office of the Pacific (OTP) within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) was established in 2019 'to enhance whole-of-government coordination and to drive implementation of Pacific-led Australian-backed solutions'. OTP priority areas are labour mobility, infrastructure, climate change, economic growth, security, and regional integration. The Pacific Islands Forum 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, adopted in 2022 and revised in 2023, emphasises gender equality, disability and social inclusion. Aid budgeted by Australia for the Pacific region in 2026-27 is $781.1m.
7. Into this picture AUKUS provides a jarring factor. This is well explained by an article by Merewalesi Tuilau, a Director of the Fiji Nuclear Test Veterans and Families Association and a Nuclear Weapons expert for Fiji with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN). She was part of a Pacific delegation brought to Australia by Quakers and ICAN (called the Pacific Peace Pilgrimage) to offer politicians and community groups their perspectives on nuclear weapons, drawing on the experience of atomic testing in the Pacific and its severe impact on the lives of the people there. Meetings with federal MPs and Senators in Canberra, and public events in Sydney and Melbourne, helped raise awareness of the issues. We would like to share here the main points made by Mere Tuilau:
    - The Pacific is not a theatre for great-power militarisation or a dumping ground for nuclear legacies. Our region, forged in the fires of nuclear testing, has not been forgotten. 315 nuclear weapons were tested across the Pacific. Islands were scarred. Waters poisoned, communities displaced, and generations traumatised. Families still live with the consequences.
    - In response, Pacific nations chose a different path. The South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (Treaty of Rarotonga), signed in 1985, committed our region

to remain free of nuclear explosive devices and radioactive waste dumping. The commitment lives on in the Blue Pacific and the vision of an Ocean of Peace – born not from abstract ideals, but from lived pain.

- Australia's AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine program now directly challenges this hard-won regional stance. While Australia, United Kingdom and the United States argue the AUKUS program is consistent with the Rarotonga Treaty and the NPT— based on the distinction between nuclear propulsion and nuclear explosive devices – legality does not equal legitimacy. Something can be legally permissible yet politically unacceptable, environmentally reckless, and morally troubling for the region most affected.
- This creates a bleak contradiction with the Australian Labor Party's own stated values. At its recent National Conference, Labor passed the "Australia and the Pacific" resolution, moved by Joanne Ryan MP. It speaks powerfully of Pacific-led solution, trust, regionalism, partnership, and a peaceful, stable region. Yet Australia cannot credibly champion a Pacific-led future while advancing a program that increases nuclear risks in our waters without Pacific Islanders' consent.
- If Australia is prepared to invest hundreds of billions of dollars in AUKUS, it must show the same political will and financial commitment to climate justice, environmental restoration, support nuclear victims, and the resilience of the Blue Pacific. Security cannot be measured solely by submarines while our communities drown, our lands remain poisoned, and the wounds of nuclear colonialism go unhealed.
- The Pacific will not serve as a military frontier for great-power rivalry. We will not become a nuclear buffer zone or the custodians of another generation's radioactive legacy. Our ocean is not a strategic corridor– it is our ancestor, our identity, our livelihood, and our sacred duty to those yet unborn.
- Our Blue Pacific Continent is not negotiable. Our sovereignty is not negotiable. Our ocean is not negotiable. And our children's future must never become collateral damage in another power's quest for Military supremacy.

Future Generations.

8. Quakers consider that the legacy we leave to younger people must give them hope and opportunity to flourish. The growing militarisation of the world is severely impacting that prospect. We would like to quote the words of two young students at The Friends School, Hobart, to highlight their views for the Inquiry:
    - Tashinga Mhembere (Year 12). "We live in a society dictated by some leaders that choose conflict over diplomacy. They preach to us about how their actions are the ones that will bring about peace in the future, yet they seem to remain ignorant of all consequences of war unrelated to what they can

gain in the present….I have classmates who have family in war-torn countries like Iran who constantly fear hearing the worst from those they love, that is if they are able to communicate at all….I know there are young people out there that are exactly like me.

"We have made a commitment to create change with peace. Because we cannot dismantle the war machine by using the fuel it feeds upon. We must use hope….Every one of us, through our actions and decisions, can bring us closer to a shared vision of peace".

- Marcel Zwart (Year 12)."Right now we are living in a time where war is no longer something we learn about after the fact. It is something we witness as it happens. Through our screens in real time we see cities reduced to rubble, families forced from their homes and entire generations growing up in the shadow of conflict. ….At Friends' the idea that every person has inherent self-worth is deeply interconnected with Quaker values.

  "War is not only about conflict, it is about systems. There are industries that don't just exist alongside war, they grow because of it. Arms manufacturers, defence contractors and corporations that profit from this instability….War leaves lasting scars on the planet as well. Land is destroyed, ecosystems are damaged and pollution from military activity remains long after the fighting ends.

  "Peace does not begin at the level of governments. It begins in the way we treat people every day. In the way we choose to listen, in the way we choose respect over division. As young people, we may not yet hold positions of power. But we are the generation that will live with the consequences of the choices being made now…Conflict is inevitable as part of being human. But war is not".

Costs and Alternatives.

9. The AUKUS arrangement was made in secret, with no consultation with Parliament or the Australian people, thereby undermining our democratic processes. It allocated funds to an extraordinary level, diverting resources from much-needed areas such as climate change, health, education, social welfare, NDIS and human security. Even in Defence, it moved funds from ongoing programs to obtaining nuclear submarines and building US bases that will become targets in future armed conflict.
10. The impact of AUKUS on women and gender equality is another significant concern. Increasing military spending has disproportionate impacts on women -

it diverts resources from social programs that might otherwise address inequality, and into areas where men are the dominant decision makers. Any escalation in military spending also increases the chances of escalations to war, which have a particular negative impact on women and children.

11. Australia's sovereignty has been lessened as a result of AUKUS. The current operation of Pine Gap and other bases has already compromised our areas of sovereign decision-making in risky situations. The degree of independent capacity for decisions on Defence has been eroded by the political commitments to become much more integrated with US systems and priorities. This makes it more likely that we will be drawn into a major armed conflict well beyond our shores and interests, as part of a US-led strategy of 'integrated deterrence'.

First Nations People

12. There can be no doubt that Aboriginal communities in central and western parts of Australia were seriously affected by the atomic testing that took place in the 1950s. The Pacific Peace Pilgrimage, referred to above (paragraph 7) in speaking about Pacific perspectives, enabled contact between Pacific visitors and Indigenous elders and exchanges of experience and concern about AUKUS. This visit began with a time of reflection and sharing among Indigenous Australians (including Karina Lester of the Inquiry Panel) and Pacific people at the Silver Wattle Quaker Centre near Canberra. Karina also spoke at a ceremony outside Parliament House commemorating the 80th anniversary of the atomic detonation in the Marshall Islands. The Pacific visitors also met members of Camp Sovereignty in Melbourne.

13. We agree with historian Henry Reynolds, who has written extensively about Indigenous justice, and who posted an article on *Pearls and Irritations* (9 August) about the militarisation of northern Australia. He noted a recent large protest at Pine Gap during which traditional land owners delivered a letter of demand. They had never been consulted about the development and the excision of land from their ancestral homeland. He said "How was indigenous land ownership to be reconciled with the current drive of succeeding Australian governments to cooperate with United States plans to use the north of the continent to become the 'central base of operation in the Indo-Pacific' to what was described as 'Chinese aggression?" He drew attention to the *Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People* (to which Australia is committed) and says "This is particularly relevant to the little-known provisions relating to the use of Indigenous land for defence purposes. The preamble to the Declaration refers to the contribution of demilitarising Indigenous lands and territories to peace, development and friendly relations among peoples. Article 30 then goes further: military activities should not take place on Indigenous lands or territories unless justified by a relevant public interest, or freely agreed with or requested by the Indigenous peoples concerned. Article 30(2) requires states to undertake

effective consultation with the Indigenous peoples concerned, through appropriate procedures and particularly through their representative institutions, before using their lands or territories for military activities.

14. An important aspect of the impact of AUKUS on First Nations communities is the disposal of nuclear waste. The nuclear submarines will bring in their wake large amounts of high-level waste material that has to be stored for a lengthy period. Australia will be seeking locations that can cope with this waste, and are likely to impose decisions on Aboriginal communities in central and northern Australia for sites. The government should explain to the Australian people now what the plans are to manage the nuclear waste.

United Nations and Peace

15. As a founding member of the United Nations, Australia has a proud record of contributing to its many peacemaking programs including preventive diplomacy and peacekeeping. It has led disarmament efforts and observed most international treaties and conventions to prevent war, achieve justice and human rights, and promoted sustainable development. It is currently on the Peacebuilding Commission which works for stronger diplomacy skills, better peacebuilding architecture, and protection of humanitarian personnel. Yet the UN is facing unprecedented cuts to its budget at a time when global military spending is soaring and the risks of violent conflict and war are greater than ever.
16. Australia could do more to support the work and aims and of the United Nations, and to offer greater resources to its efforts to prevent global conflict. In particular, it could draw public attention to the dangers of current trends towards an unrestricted arms race, and urge all member nations to recommit to world peace. In addition it could pause the AUKUS decision and reflect on better ways to allocate scarce funds multilaterally such as through international action to reverse the pressures for conflict. This would return the focus to the original aims of the global body's Charter 'to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war'.
17. Domestically, Australia could ensure that more of the global agreements it has agreed to are embedded in legislation, implement greater controls on the arms trade consistent with the Arms Trade Treaty it initiated, sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), and create a national Human Rights Act in line with international standards.

Conclusion

18. **We seek policies that prevent war and build a culture of peace. From this perspective AUKUS has little to commend it. It ties Australia into a war-fighting mode, a loss of sovereignty, and a commitment to expand military options that fuel an arms race. We need alternative approaches, such as**

diplomacy, aid and development, conflict resolution and shared responsibility for meeting the challenges of climate change, banning nuclear weapons, and reducing tension among nations.

19. **The absence of transparency in the formation of AUKUS, and the failure of the Parliament to explore its origins and purpose, have undermined confidence in our democratic practices. In addition, strong objections raised by our neighbouring countries of the Pacific have largely been ignored in the plans, despite Australia's formal support for the 'Strategy for the Blue Pacific' policies adopted by the Pacific Islands Forum.**
20. **Indigenous communities who have been repeatedly overruled and mistreated in earlier times in relation to atomic testing policies are highly likely to be adversely affected by decisions on the disposal of nuclear waste from the nuclear submarines. There needs to be a much stronger commitment by government to heed their voice and address their concerns.**
21. **Our submission includes the voices of two young people who express clearly their anxiety about the global trends towards conflict and war. This is a sample of what effect Australia's focus on national security and military defence is creating for future generations. As spending on AUKUS distorts national budgetary priorities, less is available for the very real areas of human security, education, health, welfare and environmental care.**
22. **We hope the Inquiry will reflect the significant concerns raised about AUKUS and urge the government to move to withdraw from it. Australia can do a lot better to enhance cooperation and build peace in full consultation with our people, our neighbours and allies. The role of the United Nations should be strengthened as part of the global effort to reverse the trend towards destruction.**

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