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WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR PEACE & FREEDOM

WILPF submission to the AUKUS public inquiry

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the AUKUS public inquiry.

The fundamental question before this Inquiry is not whether Australia should defend itself. It is whether AUKUS is the most effective means of protecting Australia's long-term security, prosperity, sovereignty and democratic values.

In contributing to this inquiry, the WILPF Australia Board will not attempt to address the many shortcomings of the AUKUS security agreement but shift the focus from whether AUKUS makes us militarily safer to whether it advances the human security of Australians, with a particular focus on women and First Nations people.

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)

WILPF Australia is a feminist peace-building organisation of volunteer activists which is anti-war, anti-violence, non-profit, and non-aligned, bringing civil society together to promote sustainable peace. WILPF staff, sections and members have been active and vocal supporters of the ban on nuclear weapons for over a decade, following consistent antinuclear organising and advocacy since the dawn of the nuclear age. We promote relationship diplomacy, Aboriginal concepts of peace, and building security through relationships rather than deterrence alone. As an international organisation active in over 40 countries, WILPF is calling for governments around the world to redirect financial resources from weapons to areas of spending that focus on promoting the wellbeing of their citizens and peacebuilding – in short, to fund human security not military security. Genuine human security requires a commitment to diplomacy, peacebuilding, regional cooperation, human rights, climate security, social cohesion, economic wellbeing and gender equality. AUKUS risks narrowing "security" to submarines and military power, rather than the conditions that actually allow people to live safely. We briefly discuss some of the important ways it does this below.

Investment in militarisation does not make us safer

Rather than contrasting military security with human security, security can be defined as having multiple dimensions such as military security, economic security, food security, environmental security, climate security, social cohesion, democratic resilience, regional relationships and health security. Does AUKUS improve all of these?

AUKUS draws Australia into the current trend to increased militarisation and military expenditure that we are witnessing around the world. In 2025, global military expenditure was $2.89 trillion — the highest ever recorded. Further, the US-Australia Force Posture Agreement (FPA) combined with other earlier cooperative arrangements increase out militarisation by imposing an obligation to provide bases and logistical support to US armed conflicts.

For years, WILPF has debunked the myth that militarisation creates a safer world, showing that more weapons and arms invariably lead to more violence, instability, and gender inequality. The masculinist, militarist nuclear deal proposed by the US and UK will not make Australia safer. The costs of global militarisation are not only economic but humanitarian, for example:

- Widespread senseless loss of human life and devastation of entire cities, in particular homes, hospitals and schools
- An increase in other kinds of violence, including sexual violence primarily perpetrated against women and children
- Entrenchment of deeper social inequalities that will impact generations of families.

Shifting labour and capital to the defence sector necessarily results in a diminution of investment in other sectors. Rather than more investment in militarisation, women, families and communities need housing, safety, healthcare, education, climate protection, domestic violence prevention, mental health services and secure incomes.

Nuclear weapons have gendered impacts

Nuclear weaponry and waste have gendered impacts. Women face unique devastation from the effects of the use of nuclear weapons and nuclear waste, such as reproductive and maternal health. It is known that women are more vulnerable to ionising radiation than men. Moreover, pregnant women exposed to high doses of ionising radiation are at risk of harm to their children, including malformations, disabilities, as well as the risk of stillbirth. Australia claims to be a “proud and long-time supporter of” the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. Embracing nuclear weaponry through AUKUS weakens this commitment.

First Nations exclusion

Australia has a long and ongoing legacy of colonialism, especially through nuclear waste disposal and nuclear testing on indigenous land and people. AUKUS will enable will continue these colonial and racist traditions. Despite native title and land rights laws, and the fact that AUKUS will have significant impact on a large part of Australian land and sea, First Nations people have not been consulted. There needs to be a systematic assessment of the impact on the rights and interests of our First Nations people to avoid further harm and trauma.

Further, it is proposed that nuclear waste be dumped on Aboriginal land, with no consultation with the First Peoples of that area. The proposed nuclear waste dump plans trigger the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (adopted by United Nations, Sept 2007) in Indigenous People's Article 29 rights to "Free, Prior and Informed Consent" over storage or disposal of hazardous materials on their lands. Yet, if previous decisions are any guide, national security justifications are likely to be used to override these commitments.

Lack of investment in peacebuilding, diplomacy and conflict prevention

US president Dwight Eisenhower has noted, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed".

Through investment in AUKUS, what is Australia choosing not to fund? At a minimum this includes affordable housing, disaster resilience, hospitals. mental health, Indigenous health, Pacific partnerships, diplomacy, education and scientific research.

Why is the commitment to defence spending so readily accepted while the need for investment in Peacebuilding is overlooked or ignored? Australia now has four Ministers with defence related portfolios – a Minister for Defence, an Assistant Minister for Defence, a Minister for the Defence Industry and a Minister for Veterans Affairs and Defence Personnel. In addition, the Minister for Home Affairs has been sworn to administer the Department of Defence, and the Prime Minister has created a non-ministerial appointment – a Special Envoy for Defence, Veterans' Affairs. Despite this, according to the Lowry Institute, a majority of Australians (53%) say they feel 'unsafe' or 'very unsafe' in the world.

Peacebuilding activities which have been shown to be effective in the sustained resolution of other conflicts such as Northern Ireland include funding for civil society organisations focused on peace and human rights, restorative justice, neighbourhood development and youth and community engagement. These initiatives aim to build trust and dismantle negative stereotypes and perceptions between people with conflicting beliefs and

identities. They create the potential for joint advocacy initiatives, peacebuilding capacity-building programs, and the establishment of shared spaces and cross-community initiatives which work to challenge harmful stereotypes and promote shared understandings of more peaceful futures.

Globally, violence has been estimated to cost almost US$20 trillion in 2024 – nearly 12% of global economic activity. This money could have been much better spent investing in human development and preventing conflict before it occurs.

WILPF suggests that it is time for Australia to appoint (and properly resource) a Minister for Peace. Such a position would have the mandate to promote diplomatic negotiation and fund a range of peacebuilding activities both within Australia and in collaboration with our regional neighbours. These could include investment in:

- peacebuilding capacity
- regional dialogue
- university exchanges
- Pacific partnerships
- conflict prevention
- women's peace networks
- youth exchanges
- reconciliation programs
- disaster cooperation

Increase in regional tensions

Changing Australia's defence policy to be more assertive in the region threatens our regional alliances and exposes us to additional threats. AUKUS frames Australia's security through military competition rather than diplomacy, trust-building and regional cooperation. The AUKUS Public Inquiry itself is asking whether AUKUS will keep Australia safe and "at what cost," showing there is serious public concern about this question.

In Australia we spend more than ten times as much on defence as we do on overseas aid. This in the context of shrinking global aid funding. We are moving away from investing in creating a stable, peaceful and prosperous region to investing in ways to respond to the consequences of this. This can only result in increased regional tensions.

Peace is not just the absence of war. As Andrew Hassett asserts, it is "the presence of opportunity, trust, justice and inclusion; the presence of just relations between people, communities and the environment". Simply put, Australians are not secure if our Asia-Pacific neighbours are not secure. AUKUS does nothing to promote this.

The democratic deficit

AUKUS has significant implications for civil society, especially women and Indigenous Peoples. It signals an abandonment of international commitments made to women and Indigenous people. They are an abandonment of commitments in the ALP platform, particularly to "remain strongly opposed to the importation and storage of nuclear waste that is sourced from overseas in Australia". They represent a significant shift in Defence Policy which will not make us safer. They threaten the progress that has been made in gender justice, racial justice, environmental justice and economic justice. They cede aspects of Australia's sovereign agency to foreign powers.

Despite this, AUKUS has never been subject to public scrutiny. The fact that this inquiry was crowd-funded rather than initiated by the government highlights the lack of basic democratic participation in such a significant shift in policy and investment. We highlight two examples of this below.

Firstly, disposal of high-level nuclear waste is globally unprecedented. Our AUKUS 'partners', the US and UK, have proven unable to dispose of the waste in the 60+ years since first putting nuclear submarines to sea. Further, storage and disposal of nuclear wastes already compromises the safety and welfare of the people in South and Western Australia. The fact that nuclear waste storage is prohibited in South Australia by the SA Nuclear Waste Storage (Prohibition) Act 2000 can potentially be overridden by Federal law. In addition, First Nations peoples are likely to bear the burden of imposed nuclear waste storage on their land without consultation. This is shameful, not to mention a complete abuse of power at the expense of civil society's human rights.

Secondly, the creation of Orcus Command is a clear example of how militarisation undermines democracy. Orcus Command is a specialised AFP unit created to provide protective security for the AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine program, particularly at strategically significant defence bases such as HMAS Stirling in Western Australia. FOI documents show that:

- the unit was created with minimal public disclosure
- it has a mandate extending beyond physical asset protection
- it is embedded within the Department of Defence, not a civilian oversight body
- its planning includes public order and protest activity.

This institutional placement is significant. By situating Orcus Command within Defence rather than a civilian agency, protest management around AUKUS is treated as a national security issue. This matters because protest is a cornerstone of democratic accountability. This framing of dissent primarily as a security risk deserves closer public scrutiny.

AUKUS has never been subject to public interest assessment, instead hiding behind national security arguments to avoid scrutiny and accountability. The government has never seriously attempted to show that it will produce economic benefits at least commensurate with its costs, a basic yardstick for good policy. It has

never seriously addressed the environmental, diplomatic or cultural costs. In the context of a shifting regional and global landscape, Australians deserve to have the opportunity to participate in a genuine discussion about our security options. This may or may not conclude with AUKUS, but the discussion has been suppressed since the original decision in 2011. Australia has a proud democratic tradition which is challenged by recent decisions about AUKUS.

Conclusion

Australia should stand up for the good of humanity and the environment, as nuclear weaponry, storage or disposal brings absolutely no good to any living being. We need to shift our focus towards promoting the wellbeing and human security of all our citizens and positively contributing to that of the neighbouring countries of our region.

WILPF Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Undertake an independent Human Security Assessment of AUKUS.

Recommendation 2

Undertake genuine consultation with First Nations peoples.

Recommendation 3

Publish an independent cost-benefit analysis.

Recommendation 4

Develop a National Peacebuilding Strategy.

Recommendation 5

Increase investment in diplomacy and regional cooperation.

Recommendation 6

Consider establishing a Minister for Peace.