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**AUSTRALIA'S ROUTE TO AUKUS: AN ENGLISH SCHOOL  
ANALYSIS OF AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL IDENTITY AND  
STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT**

**By:**

**Adam Tenczer**

**Supervisor:**

Máté Szalai, PhD

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# I. Research Background and Justification of the Topic

## 1. The Emergence of AUKUS in Contemporary IR Debates

The announcement of the AUKUS partnership in September 2021 between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States generated immediate scholarly and policy attention (Beeson and Chubb 2021; Gyngell 2017; Medcalf 2020; Townshend 2022). Most early analyses interpreted the pact primarily as:

- a realist balancing response to China's rise,
- a technological–defence cooperation framework,
- or an element of broader U.S. Indo-Pacific containment strategy.

While these interpretations remain analytically valid and useful, they largely frame AUKUS as a short-term strategic reaction within contemporary great power competition, which this dissertation sought to argue against (Curran 2021; Hall 2016; Laurenceson 2022; White 2019).

The existing literature overwhelmingly focuses primarily but not exclusively on:

- submarine capability,
- military interoperability,
- Indo-Pacific deterrence,
- nuclear proliferation concerns,
- and alliance management.

However, the deeper historical and identity-based foundations of Australia's participation in AUKUS have remained underexplored.

This dissertation emerges from the recognition of this analytical gap.

## 2. The Literature Gap

Although some scholars (e.g. Duncan Bell, Ben Wellings, James Curran, Stuart Macintyre or from the Hungarian researchers Gergely Egedy, Gábor Csizmazia, Tamás Magyarics and Tamás Baranyi) have addressed aspects of Anglosphere identity and imperial legacy, their contributions have typically remained peripheral to AUKUS-specific analysis (Baranyi 2021; Egedy 2022).

The dominant theoretical approaches show clear limitations:

Realism explains threat perception and balancing behaviour but cannot explain why Australia reflexively turned to Anglosphere partners rather than regional multilateralism (Curran 2021; Vucetic 2011; Wellings and Ghazarian 2023). Liberal Institutionalism highlights technological and institutional cooperation but underestimates symbolic legitimacy and identity continuity. Constructivism acknowledges norms and identity but often lacks historical institutional depth and path-dependent sequencing (Fioretos 2011; Pierson 2004).

What was missing was a framework that:

- integrates identity and institutional continuity,
- traces long-term strategic culture,
- and situates AUKUS within a layered structure of international society.

This dissertation therefore seeks to fill two interconnected gaps:

1. The under-theorisation of AUKUS as an identity-driven alliance decision.
2. The absence of historically grounded synthesis between the English School and Historical Institutionalism in alliance studies.

### **3. Intellectual Motivation and Broader Context of the Research**

The research is also situated within the wider debates on:

- the durability of the current US-led “Rule-Based International Order” (R BIO),
- the fragmentation of Western political-military cohesion,
- and the rise of “sub-global solidarist” communities within global international society.

The Anglosphere has rarely been treated as a serious analytical category in IR theory. It is often dismissed as rhetorical or normative with no real analytical framework to rely on. This dissertation argues against that and seeks to utilize the works of for example Barry Buzan and Cornelia Navari. This dissertation holds that the Anglosphere constitutes a meaningful sub-global international society with historically embedded primary institutions and identity structures. AUKUS represents the most recent institutional revelation of this sub-global society.

Understanding AUKUS therefore requires not only geopolitical analysis but a *longue durée* historical reading of Australian identity formation, imperial legacy, ANZUS institutionalisation, Five Eyes integration, and path-dependent strategic imagination which this dissertation seeks to understand.

### **4. If AUKUS Then Why Australia?**

Australia provides a uniquely revealing and analytically productive case for examining the interaction between identity, institutional continuity, and alliance politics in contemporary international relations. Australia becomes a strategically revealing case in relation to AUKUS because Australia is:

- geographically embedded in Asia,
- economically interdependent with China,
- historically rooted in British imperial identity,
- institutionally anchored in U.S.-led security structures.

Unlike the United States or the United Kingdom, Australia faced genuine and structurally meaningful strategic alternatives at the time of the AUKUS decision:

- deeper ASEAN engagement,
- hedging between China and the US,
- or Fortress Australia self-reliance.

Yet despite the existence of these plausible alternatives, Australia chose to deepen its alignment with its Anglosphere partners (as it historically already happened multiple times). Rather than consolidating its hedging (balancing) strategy or strengthening regional multilateralism, Canberra committed itself to intensified and deepened Anglo-American integration through AUKUS, fully aware of the economic and diplomatic costs from confronting with China (Medcalf 2020; White 2019).

This decision is analytically significant because it was not structurally predetermined, as this dissertation argues against such fatalisms. Australia possessed strategic flexibility, yet it chose the option most consistent with its historically embedded alliance traditions. The case therefore serves as a critical test of the dissertation's core argument, specifically that identity-based path dependency (not determinacy) narrows the spectrum of perceived legitimate foreign policy choices and frames certain alignments not only preferable, but "natural" in the sense of political credibility.

## **5. Scientific Relevance**

The scientific relevance of this dissertation can be identified along three interrelated dimensions.

### **5.1 Theoretical Contribution**

The dissertation develops International Relations theory by systematically synthesising the English School and Historical Institutionalism in the analysis of alliance politics (Bull 2012; Buzan 2004; Navari 2021; Rixen and Viola 2016; Watson 2009). While both approaches have been influential in their own respective field, their combined application remains rare in IR scholarship. By integrating the English School's focus on international society, primary institutions, and solidarist identity with Historical Institutionalism's emphasis on path dependency, sequencing, and critical junctures, the dissertation develops a historically grounded and normatively sensitive explanatory framework. This synthesis demonstrates how identity and institutional continuity can be analytically operationalised in the study of foreign policy alignment.

### **5.2 Empirical Contribution**

Empirically, the dissertation wanted to create a comprehensive, historically embedded and identity-driven explanation of Australia's accession to AUKUS with special respect to the Whitlam, Menzies and Howard government's foreign policy agenda (Clayton and Newman 2023; Curran 2021; Wellings and Mycock 2019). Besides interpretations that treat the pact primarily as a reaction to China's rise or as a technological defence arrangement, the study sought to reconstruct the long-term evolution of Australian strategic culture and alliance dependence on its British and American partners with the examination of "mateship", imperial loyalty and adherence to the RBIO. Through "historical process tracing" across key historical junctures, it demonstrates that AUKUS represents the culmination of an "entrenched" Anglosphere trajectory (in terms of likelihood) rather than a sudden geopolitical shift.

### **5.3 Policy Relevance**

Beyond its theoretical and empirical contributions, the dissertation wanted to formulate a few policy relevant aspects too. By revealing the identity-based and path-dependent foundations of Australia's strategic alignment, this study highlights the structural risks inherent in deeply embedded alliance commitments. These include reduced strategic flexibility, increased dependency on great power partners, and potential legitimacy tensions in a shifting global order. In a period marked by great power rivalry and contestation of the Rule-Based International Order, understanding the historical and identity dimensions of alliance behaviour is essential for informed strategic decision-making.

## **6. Core Claim of the Research Background**

The research is built on the recognition as it was already indicated that AUKUS was not a sudden strategic reaction but the culmination of a historically embedded Anglosphere identity trajectory reinforced through institutional path dependency which has a few implications worth mentioning.

This research from this point of view repositions AUKUS from procurement decision to identity-constituting act, from balancing strategy to solidarist reaffirmation and from tactical alliance to sub-global society consolidation.

# II. Applied Methods

## 1. Research Design

This dissertation adopted a qualitative, theory-driven single case study design focusing on Australia’s accession to AUKUS in 2021. The research design was selected because the central research question seeks to uncover long-term identity formation, institutional path dependency and historically embedded mechanisms shaping alliance behaviour.

Such complex causal mechanisms cannot be adequately captured through large-N statistical models or purely quantitative approaches. The objective is not generalisability in the positivist sense, but mechanism-based explanation and theoretically informed interpretation.

Australia represents a critical and paradigmatic case for testing the dissertation’s hypothesis. As it was already mentioned unlike the United States or the United Kingdom, Australia faced real strategic alternatives in the Indo-Pacific. Its choice to deepen Anglosphere alignment therefore allows for the analytical investigation of whether identity-based path dependency narrows the horizon of legitimate foreign policy options.

## 2. Theoretical Framework Operationalisation

The research design is explicitly grounded in the combined application of:

- The English School (ES)
- Historical Institutionalism (HI)

The two frameworks serve complementary analytical functions:

English School	Historical Institutionalism
Explains <i>why</i> identity and legitimacy matter	Explains <i>how</i> institutional continuity constrains choice
Focuses on international society and primary institutions	Focuses on path dependency and sequencing
Interprets AUKUS as solidarist reaffirmation	Interprets AUKUS as institutional culmination

The English School is operationalised in this dissertation through four clearly defined analytical components:

- **The concept of international society** was utilized to frame Australia not merely as a rational actor operating in an anarchic system, but as a member of a rule-bound normative community. Within this community, legitimacy, shared expectations, and historically established (durable) practices (as Buzan framed) shape state behaviour alongside material considerations (Buzan 2004, 2014). Australia’s alignment choices are therefore interpreted within a socially structured environment rather than as isolated

strategic calculations, where a more exclusive community (the “club” of core Anglosphere nations) has historically exercised a privileged normative and institutional influence over Canberra’s strategic imagination, shaping what is perceived as legitimate, credible, and politically sustainable foreign policy behaviour.

- **The notion of primary institutions** (such as sovereignty, diplomacy, alliance management, intelligence cooperation, and great power stewardship as Hedley Bull framed in his original work) is employed to interpret Anglosphere practices as historically embedded and socially reproduced structures of cooperation (Bull 2012; Floyd 2021). These institutions are treated not as temporary arrangements but as durable normative frameworks that generate trust, predictability, and shared standards of legitimate behaviour.
- **The pluralism–solidarism spectrum** provides a classical ES analytical lens for understanding AUKUS as a solidarist consolidation within a narrower community of shared political values and strategic culture. Rather than accommodating diversity within a pluralist global order, AUKUS reflects the prioritisation of deeper identity convergence and intensified cooperation among culturally proximate states.
- **The layered structure of international society** (global, regional, and sub-global levels) allows the Anglosphere to be conceptualised as a sub-global society operating within, yet distinct from, the broader Western International Society and the global order. This layered framework makes it possible to situate AUKUS simultaneously as a sub-global act of Anglosphere consolidation and as a development with implications for the wider Rule-Based International Order.

Historical Institutionalism is operationalised through a complementary set of structured mechanisms:

- **Path dependency** explains how early strategic commitments (initially to Britain, later to the United States) became institutionalised and generated self-reinforcing patterns of alliance behaviour (Pierson 2000). These commitments progressively narrowed the spectrum of perceived legitimate alternatives.
- **Critical junctures** enable the identification of historically contingent moments (such as 1942 with the fall of Singapore or the deterioration of Sino–Australian relations) when strategic redirection was theoretically possible, yet ultimately resulted in reinforcement rather than departure from the existing trajectory (Pierson 2004).
- **Institutional reproduction** captures the processes through which alliance structures and strategic doctrines were normalised across time through bureaucratic routines, elite socialisation, defence interoperability, and intelligence integration.
- **Layered institutional change** allows AUKUS to be understood not as a rupture, but as an additional institutional layer built upon pre-existing Anglosphere alignment, thereby reinforcing rather than replacing earlier commitments.

The integration of these two frameworks enables the dissertation to move beyond both (the ahistorical) constructivism, which often lacks institutional depth and temporal structure, and purely materialist realism, which reduces alliance behaviour to threat-balancing logic. Instead,

it offers a historically grounded, normatively sensitive, and institutionally structured explanation of Australia's strategic choice.

### 3. Historical Process Tracing

The primary methodological tool is **historical process tracing**.

Process tracing enables the reconstruction of sequential causal chains across historical time. It is particularly suited to Historical Institutionalism, as it allows the identification of early institutional commitments, reinforcement mechanisms, moments of institutional layering, and critical junctures (Mahoney 2015).

The dissertation identifies five key critical junctures in Australian strategic history:

1. The fall of Singapore (1942) and the turn toward the United States.
2. The British withdrawal "East of Suez" (1968).
3. The Vietnam War and consolidation of ANZUS (1953).
4. The post-9/11 War on Terror and deepened interoperability.
5. The deterioration of Sino–Australian relations (2018–2021) culminating in AUKUS.

Each juncture is analysed as both an external shock, and an identity-redefining moment. This sequencing demonstrates that AUKUS represents not rupture, but institutional culmination.

### 4. Sources and Data Collection

The research draws on three interrelated categories of sources. First, primary sources form the empirical backbone of the analysis, including Australian Defence White Papers (2009, 2013, 2016, 2020), official speeches of successive Prime Ministers from Whitlam to Albanese, parliamentary debates, ANZUS Treaty documents, AUKUS declaration texts, as well as publications of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Defence. These materials provide direct insight into the evolution of Australia's strategic thinking and policy articulation.

Second, the dissertation engages extensively with secondary academic literature. This includes key contributions from the English School (e.g. Bull, Buzan, Watson, Navari, Linklater, Hurrell), foundational works in Historical Institutionalism (Pierson, Thelen, Peters), as well as scholarship on the Anglosphere (Bennett, Wellings, Mycock, Egedy). In addition, the study draws on the historiography of Australian foreign policy (Curran, Gyngell, Medcalf, Macintyre) and literature addressing the Rules-Based International Order and the Western International Society.

Third, policy-oriented and think-tank materials are incorporated to contextualise contemporary debates surrounding AUKUS. These include analyses and reports from institutions such as the Lowy Institute, the Hungarian Institute for International Affairs, and the Australian Strategic

Policy Institute (ASPI), alongside media commentary from ABC and BBC, as well as official policy statements and reactions from British, American, Chinese, and French sources. These materials are employed analytically rather than normatively.

## **5. Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of the dissertation is deliberately constrained in order to maintain analytical coherence and theoretical focus. Accordingly, the study does not engage in the technical analysis of submarine procurement, cost–benefit calculations in defence economics, detailed legal assessments of nuclear non-proliferation, or operational evaluations of military capabilities.

Instead, the analysis remains firmly centred on the historical and normative dimensions of Australia’s strategic orientation. Particular emphasis is placed on processes of identity formation, the continuity of institutional and normative frameworks, the strategic imagination associated with the Anglosphere, and the enduring legitimacy of imperial and post-imperial alliance structures.

# **III. Scientific Results (and Novelty) of the Dissertation**

## **Result 1. A Theoretically Integrated Framework for Historically Embedded Alliance Analysis**

One of the primary theoretical contribution of the dissertation lies in the systematic integration of the English School (ES) and Historical Institutionalism (HI) into a single analytical framework for the study of alliance politics.

While the English School provided in the dissertation a normative and sociological understanding of international society, political legitimacy, and Anglo-American identity, it has often remained insufficiently structured in terms of causal sequencing and institutional persistence. Historical Institutionalism, by contrast, offered useful tools for analysing path dependency, critical junctures, and institutional reproduction, yet it has rarely been applied to questions of identity-based international alignment.

This dissertation intended to demonstrate that:

- How the English School explains identity-based belonging matters in alliance choices, by conceptualizing states as members of normative communities rather than merely strategic actors in an anarchic system.
- How Historical Institutionalism explains early strategic commitments become self-reinforcing trajectories, narrowing the range of perceived legitimate alternatives over time.
- How this integration enables a historically grounded analysis of foreign policy behaviour that avoids both ahistorical constructivism and purely materialist realism.

This synthesis represents an original theoretical contribution to International Relations scholarship, particularly in the field of alliance studies, where these two traditions are rarely combined in a systematic and operationalized manner.

## **Result 2. The Anglosphere as a Sub-Global International Society**

The dissertation provided an empirically grounded application of the English School's layered international society framework to conceptualize the Anglosphere as a sub-global international society within the broader Western International Society (Buzan and Schouenborg 2018). Contrary to interpretations that treat the Anglosphere as rhetorical, a "nostalgic" relic of the Imperial era, or merely cultural, the research demonstrates that it constitutes:

- a historically embedded community structured by primary institutions (intelligence-sharing, military interoperability, alliance management),
- a solidarist normative environment generating shared expectations of loyalty and strategic coordination,
- a distinct layer of international society operating within (but not identical to) the wider Western-led order.

By reconstructing the institutional evolution of ANZUS, Five Eyes, forward defence doctrines, and post-9/11 integration, the dissertation shows that Anglosphere cooperation from the Australian perspective functions as a durable structure of strategic trust. This structure does not eliminate the possibility of alternative policies, but it significantly narrows the spectrum of politically legitimate and socially credible foreign policy options where ASEAN-cooperation just to mention one example remains a secondary option.

In doing so, the study seeks to reframe the Anglosphere from a political slogan into an analytically wider category within English School theory and contributes to the refinement of the concept of sub-global international societies.

### **Result 3. Reinterpreting AUKUS as the Culmination of Identity-Based Path Dependency**

The central empirical finding of the dissertation is that AUKUS cannot be adequately explained as a short-term balancing response to China's rise or as a mere technological procurement arrangement where Australia receives 8 nuclear submarines. Instead, it incorporates the institutional culmination of a long-standing identity-based path dependency in Australian strategic culture. Through historical process tracing, the dissertation demonstrates that key critical junctures (such as the fall of Singapore (1942), the British withdrawal "East of Suez," the Vietnam War, the post-9/11 War on Terror or the deterioration of Sino-Australian relations) did not redirect Australia away from Anglosphere alignment. Rather, they reinforced and layered existing institutional commitments.

AUKUS therefore emerges as a solidarist reaffirmation of Anglosphere identity, an additional institutional layer built upon prior alliance integration, and an identity-constituting act within the Western International Society.

This reinterpretation contributes to alliance theory by demonstrating that alliances may deepen even under conditions of economic interdependence with strategic competitors, and that identity-based institutional continuity can outweigh short-term material hedging incentives.

In this sense, the dissertation shows that Australia's strategic choice was neither structurally predetermined nor purely reactive, but historically conditioned through cumulative institutional layering and identity consolidation.

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