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Australia-UK Nuclear-Powered Submarine Partnership Treaty

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On July 26, 2025, Australia and the United Kingdom signed the Nuclear-Powered Submarine Partnership and Collaboration Treaty in Geelong, further strengthening their defence relationship within the AUKUS framework. The treaty formalises cooperation under Pillar I of AUKUS, supporting the design, construction, operation, and disposal of conventionally armed, nuclear-powered SSN-AUKUS submarines. It also facilitates port visits and rotations of UK Astute-class submarines at HMAS Stirling as part of the Submarine Rotational Force–West. The agreement aligns with the AUKUS Naval Nuclear Propulsion Agreement, aiming to enhance security in the Indo-Pacific region.

The treaty is expected to deliver economic benefits, including job creation in the UK and support for Australia's naval infrastructure and workforce development. However, concerns remain regarding the substantial financial commitments required from Australian taxpayers, which could amount to hundreds of billions of dollars over several decades. Critics have also raised issues about nuclear proliferation risks associated with transferring naval nuclear propulsion technology, despite assurances that all activities will comply with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards.

The timing of the treaty, amid a US review of the AUKUS partnership, highlights its geopolitical significance. It demonstrates a united front between Australia and the UK, despite uncertainties within the United States. The deal also occurs against a backdrop of regional tensions, notably objections from China, which views AUKUS as destabilising. The Australian Government must balance enhancing national security with fiscal responsibility and adherence to non-proliferation commitments.

While the Geelong Treaty marks a significant development in Australia-UK defence cooperation, its ultimate success will depend on transparent oversight and clear communication with the public. Australians require assurance that this investment will yield genuine security and economic benefits, rather than serve as mere diplomatic signalling or lead to unchecked expenditure.