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AUKMIN: Marles and Wong Host UK Counterparts in Sydney Talks

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Defence Minister Richard Marles and Foreign Minister Penny Wong will host UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy and Defence Secretary John Healey in Sydney on 25 July 2025 for the Australia–United Kingdom Ministerial Consultations (AUKMIN). This marks the second AUKMIN held since the UK's Labour Government, led by Prime Minister Keir Starmer, took office.

The high-level talks aim to strengthen bilateral defence cooperation, deepen engagement under the AUKUS trilateral agreement, and address shared strategic challenges in the Indo-

Pacific. The summit also seeks to reinforce economic resilience amid ongoing global trade disruptions and regional security tensions.

AUKMIN 2025 coincides with Exercise Talisman Sabre, Australia's largest multinational military exercise, running from 13 July to 4 August 2025. Approximately 35,000 personnel from 19 nations are participating. The UK's Carrier Strike Group, led by HMS *Prince of Wales*, arrived in Darwin on 23 July, marking the first visit by a UK aircraft carrier to Australia since 1997. The group includes HMS *Dauntless* and HMS *Richmond*, along with embarked F-35B fighter aircraft and allied vessels from Canada, Norway, and Spain.

This deployment is part of Operation Highmast, the UK's major Indo-Pacific naval mission, launched in April 2025. The operation reflects the UK's strategic shift towards the region and supports expanded defence ties with key partners, including Australia, the United States, and Japan.

Economic considerations will feature prominently in the talks, particularly around AUKUS submarine procurement and technology transfer arrangements. While significant long-term industrial benefits are anticipated, rising defence costs continue to draw public and political scrutiny. Opposition figures have warned that escalating expenditure risks placing pressure on domestic infrastructure and public services.

A frequently cited figure of A\$368 billion as the projected cost of the AUKUS submarine program by 2050 could not be independently verified and should be treated with caution. Official estimates are subject to change based on procurement decisions, inflation, and workforce capacity.

The increased tempo of AUKMIN meetings, now held every six months signals the UK's growing strategic relevance to Australia. Analysts have noted the UK now ranks just behind the United States and Japan as a top-tier security partner in Australian foreign policy.

The summit will also address global trade stability, critical to Australia's export-driven economy. The UK's post-Brexit pivot to the Indo-Pacific aligns closely with Australia's regional priorities.

However, concerns have been raised about the government's lack of detail regarding its commitment to enforceable, rules-based trade frameworks. Members of the Opposition

have urged greater transparency to ensure national economic interests are not compromised in pursuit of diplomatic or defence gains.

As Australia deepens its alliance with the United Kingdom, the government faces the ongoing challenge of balancing long-term strategic objectives with immediate fiscal and economic realities.