

US ambassador suggests nuclear submarine sale to Australia

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A front page article in the *Australian Financial Review* on February 22 reported that the US ambassador in Canberra, Jeffrey Bleich, has floated the possibility of Washington selling or leasing nuclear submarines to Australia—a first for any country.

While Defence Minister Stephen Smith restated the Labor Party's position that it would not consider the "nuclear option", the report is a further indication of Washington's moves to strengthen military ties with Australia as it aggressively confronts China. According to the *Review*, Bleich stressed that "Washington viewed Australia's subs program as crucial to security in the Asia-Pacific region."

Bleich's comments take place in the context of an ongoing discussion within Australian defence and foreign policy circles over the future of the country's crisis-prone Collins class submarine fleet. A government-commissioned review last December found that, at times, only one or two of the six diesel-electric submarines were available for service. It concluded that the fleet was "unfit for purpose".

In 2007, the former Liberal Howard government outlined a plan to replace the Collins submarines with a new Australian model of diesel-electric submarines. The Rudd Labor government's 2009 defence white paper proposed the local construction of a fleet of 12 new submarines to replace the Collins fleet in the long-term. The estimated cost would exceed \$A30 billion and the submarines would not go into service until at least 2025.

The alternative of purchasing US nuclear submarines has been proposed by several prominent figures in the political establishment, including the foreign editor of Murdoch's *Australian*, Greg Sheridan, and Peter Reith,

the former defence minister in the Howard government. The proposal has been justified on the grounds it would cost 30 to 50 percent less than building a new conventional fleet locally, and off-the-shelf American vessels could be put into operation far sooner. Nuclear submarines also have a number of military advantages over conventional models: they can remain submerged for longer periods, have a greater range due to extended intervals between refuelling, and can travel at a high speed for a greater length of time.

The notion of Australia acquiring nuclear submarines cannot be assessed apart from the US perspective of using the north and west of the continent as a key staging base for American military operations. This was unveiled by Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard and US President Barack Obama during his visit to the country in November. While the military agreements focussed on the stationing of 2,500 US marines in Darwin by 2016, far more regular visits by US warships and aircraft to Australia were also announced. The intention is to expand joint US-Australian operations in the Indian Ocean to assert strategic control over the sea lanes through South East Asia into the Pacific. The US would thus have the capacity to block critical shipping routes on which China depends to import energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa.

Following Obama's visit, the initial recommendations of an Australian defence posture review were released in early February. Its authors outlined both shifting Australian military assets to the north and the need to upgrade various ports and airbases to enable greater use by US forces. The review specifically called for HMAS Stirling, a naval base near Perth, to be upgraded so that it could better support American nuclear submarines, and suggested the establishment of a new naval base in

Brisbane to host nuclear-powered vessels. American nuclear warships are also cleared to dock at Darwin, Jervis Bay and Hobart.

US nuclear submarines already use HMAS Stirling on a periodic basis, but the base's facilities are tailored to meet the needs of the conventionally-powered Collins fleet. The *Review* article drew attention to one possible motive behind ambassador's Bleich suggestion. It noted: "Though the idea has been criticised as unworkable because Australia doesn't have a nuclear industry to support a nuclear submarine fleet defence sources suggest that the Australian fleet could be maintained at a US base in the Pacific Ocean or a US nuclear submarine base could be established in Australia." That is, the proposal could provide the rationale to construct a new facility on Australian territory jointly operated with the US military.

All these moves would be viewed in China as highly aggressive. The purchase or leasing of nuclear submarines would give the Australian navy the potential to mount aggressive operations in waters far from Australia, including in the Indian Ocean, the strategic straits through South East Asia and off the Chinese mainland. A US base in Australia would enhance the ability of American nuclear submarines to carry out such operations in the same areas.

On February 7, Professor Ross Babbage, a pro-US foreign policy analyst and founder of the right-wing Kokoda Foundation think-tank, prefigured the US ambassador's suggestion with comments to the *Australian*. He wrote: "Australia needs to consider purchasing 10-12 of the United States' latest nuclear-powered attack submarines in order to balance, offset and defer the dramatic expansion of China's military capabilities." Babbage claimed that "China's massive military build-up is clearly designed to force the US and its allies out of the Western Pacific." The *Australian* noted Babbage's view that "a combined force of Australian and US nuclear submarines sharing a base in Australia would send a very strong message to China's military leaders."

A layer of the Australian political establishment is deeply alarmed by the implications of the Gillard government's support for Washington's aggressive stance toward China. Hugh White, professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University, contributed

to the debate on new submarines with a column on February 7 in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. White wrote that "the US shield is no sure bet" as Chinese power increased and an "Asian century" dawned. He asserted that the Australian military needed an "independent capacity to defend the continent" and the country had to be "an independent middle power." He advocated the construction of a fleet of 18 to 24 Australian-built small diesel submarines that were not reliant on the US.

For now, the Labor government has restated its opposition to nuclear-powered submarines. Defence Minister Smith commented last week that "all options are being considered other than nuclear propulsion, which the government has ruled out." The Defence Department is reportedly in discussion with a number of European companies to develop a fleet of conventionally powered submarines, and is considering purchasing Japanese-designed and built vessels.

That stance could change, however. At its December 2011 national conference, the Labor Party ended its longstanding opposition to uranium sales to India, which has not signed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. The move, which was aimed at facilitating closer military ties between Canberra, New Delhi and Washington, followed a public call by Ambassador Bleich for the Australian government to do so.

Whether an Australian nuclear submarine fleet eventuates or not, the US ambassador's comments underscore the extent to which Australian capitalism has been drawn into a maelstrom of geo-political tensions.



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