

Australian government speeds up plans for nuclear-powered submarines to confront China

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Within days of last week's announcement of a new US-UK-Australia (AUKUS) military alliance against China, the Australian government accelerated its plans to acquire nuclear-powered submarines from the US and UK.

These moves indicate that preparations for war against China, potentially within years, not decades, are intensifying. When the AUKUS pact was unveiled, concerns were expressed within Australia's military and media that the delivery of the new submarines would not begin until at least the late 2030s, if not the 2040s.

Earlier this year, both the outgoing and incoming heads of the US Indo-Pacific Command spoke of a war against China within six years, possibly triggered by a confrontation over Taiwan, which the US has de facto recognised since 1979 as being part of China.

The AUKUS agreement includes a deal for Australia to effectively become a nuclear state. Regardless of public denials that it will seek nuclear weapons and lip service to nuclear non-proliferation treaties, Australia would obtain submarines with the capacity to launch nuclear missiles. These vessels would be capable of long-range deployment within striking distance of China.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said his government had yet to enter into any contracts for such submarines and would be negotiating agreements over the next 12 to 18 months.

Speaking from Washington last weekend, however, Australian Defence Minister Peter Dutton said he had spoken to Biden administration officials about leasing Virginia class nuclear-powered, attack submarines and Australia would hold similar talks with Britain.

Such arrangements have clearly been under discussion for months, as was the AUKUS pact itself, behind the backs of the population in the three countries. Evidently, Australian naval personnel will work on US and UK nuclear submarines, including in Australian ports and across the Indo-Pacific region.

Finance Minister Simon Birmingham told a media conference in Adelaide he expected lease arrangements or greater joint operations with the US and UK “that sees our sailors working more closely” and “potentially on UK and US vessels to get that skills and training and knowledge.”

Further light was shed on these preparations by an op-ed column in the *Australian Financial Review* last Monday by Ross Babbage, a Canberra-based non-resident senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, a US military-backed think tank.

“We need to get the new submarines quickly,” Babbage insisted. He proposed as “the most attractive” American submarines to buy or lease—“the standard Virginia and the stretched Virginia with the Vertical Payload Module (VPM).

“The stretched VPM design is particularly attractive because for a 15 percent price premium it triples each boat's firepower to 40 missiles and also accommodates other payloads. This version has the flexibility to serve as a ‘mother ship’ for robot mini-submarines.”

Babbage gave some idea of the scale of military expansion that would be involved. He said the program would require a tripling of the number of submariners and support personnel. A new submarine base would need to be built on Australia's east coast, probably at Port Kembla, just south of Sydney, and the Stirling

naval base near Perth would have to be expanded. Submarine manufacturing capabilities centred on Adelaide would need to be “strengthened.”

Babbage also indicated the vast sums of money to be spent, on top of the billions of dollars to be paid to the French Naval company for pulling out of the Australian government’s 2015 contract for it to build a fleet of diesel-powered submarines.

“The best option will probably be the Virginia with VPM, possibly with a small number of British systems fitted. Modest customisation and domestic construction will incur additional expense but should result in a unit price of \$11 billion to \$14 billion per boat.”

The submarine plan is part of a deeper integration of Australia into US war plans. Australia is to become a continent-wide US base of operations, with thousands of American troops, warplanes, nuclear-armed warships and other essential war-fighting facilities, in addition to the existing key bases like the Pine Gap satellite communications and weapons guidance station, near Alice Springs in the centre of Australia.

At a meeting in Washington the day after the AUKUS announcement, the US and Australian defence and foreign ministers issued a communiqué that expanded the Force Posture basing agreement initially signed by the Gillard Labor government with the Obama administration in 2011, which included hosting US marines near the northern strategic city of Darwin.

The opposition Labor Party, in line with its decades-long commitment to the US alliance, immediately backed the AUKUS pact, having been consulted about it in advance. Its only difference, echoing pro-US military and strategic think tanks, was to criticise the Liberal-National government for delaying the planned arrival of new submarines.

Labor’s shadow foreign affairs minister Penny Wong said: “This new plan will not be on line until 2040—15 years later than what future subs were originally planned for. The Morrison-Joyce government must ensure there is not a capability gap as a result of this government’s chopping and changing.”

Senator Wong used a speech to the government-backed United States Studies Centre on Thursday to reiterate that Labor supported the government’s embrace of nuclear propulsion for the submarines, while again raising concern about the delay in acquiring them.

Wong offered Labor’s services to the government to help jointly stifle popular opposition to the submarine pact and the underlying war preparations. She urged the government to bring Labor “into the tent” and adopt Labor leader Anthony Albanese’s proposal for a bipartisan consultation mechanism on the submarine program.

Successive Australian governments, including the Labor governments of Hawke and Keating from 1983 to 1996 and of Rudd and Gillard from 2007 to 2013, have increasingly integrated the country’s armed forces into the US military, as part of the Australian imperialism’s strategic dependence on Washington since World War II.



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