

A year since the AUKUS submarine announcement: Australia's transformation into a hub of militarism and war

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16 March 2024

Last Thursday marked exactly a year since the announcement that Australia will acquire nuclear-powered submarines under its militarist AUKUS pact with the US and the UK. Australia is set to buy three to five Virginia class subs from the US early next decade, to be followed by jointly-manufactured subs in a program that will extend for decades.

On March 14, 2023, when the announcement of the submarine program was made, the population was witness to a spectacle of bombastic militarism. Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese stood beside US President Joe Biden and UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, at a port in San Diego, and unveiled what he described as “the biggest single investment in Australia’s defence capability in all of our history.”

Albanese cynically sought to present the submarine acquisition as a vast jobs program, comparing it to the establishment of the Australian car industry in the post-World War Two period. In fact, even by the government’s own figures, just 20,000 jobs will be created over three decades. Given that the submarine bill is up to \$368 billion, that would equate to a spend of more than \$18 million per job.

It was left to Sunak to spell out the real purpose of the announcement. Directly referencing China, along with Russia, the British prime minister accused those countries of threatening “to create a world defined by danger, disorder, and division. Faced with this new reality it is more important than ever that we strengthen the resilience of our own countries.” Sunak said the submarine announcement was a key pillar of a far broader buildup of military capabilities.

Sunak was engaged in projection. The submarine announcement had nothing to do with defence, much less decreasing “danger, disorder, and division.” The sole conceivable purpose of the Australian acquisition is to engage in menacing operations throughout the Indo-Pacific, including off the coast of the Chinese mainland, aimed at threatening and menacing Beijing. The nuclear-powered submarines can deploy further than conventional craft and for longer, are faster than them and can evade detection.

More generally, it is the US that has been engaged for years in a vast military build-up directed against China, which the strategists of American imperialism openly proclaim as the chief threat to US global dominance that must be countered and defeated.

In 2023, the submarine announcement produced considerable

shock and anger among ordinary people in Australia, because it lifted the lid on longstanding war preparations.

In 2011, then President Barack Obama announced a US “pivot to Asia” from the floor of the Australian parliament, and the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard immediately signed on. Successive Australian administrations have deepened Australia’s integration into the US anti-China war preparations. But that build-up was largely hidden from the population.

The AUKUS submarine announcement, however, could not be hidden from the population. In addition to its militarism, many ordinary people expressed hostility to the vast expenditure on weapons of war, amid a cost-of-living and social crisis and the degradation of public schools, hospitals and other vital infrastructure.

For that reason, the one-year anniversary was decidedly muted. Albanese and other senior Labor leaders did not draw attention to it. There were no large public events or discussions of the implications and purposes of the submarine acquisition.

The limited coverage in the media was dominated by the news that the Biden administration’s draft budget for 2025 stipulated funding for the construction of only one Virginia class sub. Various commentators speculated that this could jeopardise the US ability to deliver the subs to Australia early next decade as scheduled. The tenor of the coverage, expressing impatience for the arrival of the subs, itself underscored the uncritical alignment of the official press with the war drive.

The exclusive focus on the prospective Australian submarine fleet and its start date has also served to obscure the broader ramifications of AUKUS. US military figures have repeatedly stated that Washington and its allies must be prepared to wage war against China within years, not decades. The AUKUS program, in addition to locking a long term submarine commitment for Australia, includes far more immediate measures that align with that timeframe.

A key component of the submarine announcement was the declaration that US and British nuclear-powered subs would begin “rotating” through Stirling naval base in Western Australia in 2027. “Rotating” is a euphemism for basing. The US has for years pushed for increased access to Stirling, which is strategically located on the coast of the Indian Ocean.

2027 may be when facilities required to sustain up to 700 US

sailors at any given time are completed, but for all intents and purposes, the “rotation” is already beginning. Coinciding with the one-year anniversary, the USS Annapolis, part of the US nuclear-powered fleet of submarines, arrived in Perth, where it docked at the Stirling base. A US statement declared that such visits would be frequent, leading up to the formal basing arrangement in 2027.

That is part of a far broader expansion of US basing, particularly focussing on the north and west of Australia, near sea lanes and ocean passageways that would be crucial to a war with China.

A US marine base in Darwin, established under the 2011 “pivot,” now hosts 2,500 marines, up from 500. US nuclear-capable B-52 bombers are stationed nearby, effectively ending Australia’s nuclear-weapons free status. Upgrades are being conducted to bases near Darwin, to facilitate operations of US bombers and fighter jets, while a vast fuel storage network is under construction.

Last July, several months after the AUKUS submarine announcement, Australia-US Ministerial Consultations were held in Brisbane. There, the Labor government agreed to a deal providing US forces with their most extensive basing rights in the history of the US-Australia alliance.

A joint statement “recalled the Force Posture Agreement, which recognises the mutual benefits to Australia and the United States from access to facilities and areas in Australia by the United States Armed Forces and that such access and use is on a rotational basis...” It then spelt out carte blanche US access to Australian military facilities, across all branches of the armed forces.

More generally, the militaries of the US and Australia, and sections of the economy critical to war, are being integrated to an unprecedented extent. In the months after the submarine announcement, the two countries unveiled a plan for a joint intelligence centre that would operate within Australia’s Defense Intelligence Organization, to be opened this year.

They also unveiled a joint missile production program. And the Biden administration has moved to designate Australia as a “domestic source” for rare minerals, meaning the US can directly finance and help to manage the extraction of minerals deemed to be of strategic significance.

For the Australian military, the nuclear-powered subs are only one component of a far-reaching overhaul. A month after the announcement, Labor unveiled a Defence Strategic Review (DSR) that it had commissioned in record time.

In recommendations accepted by the government, the DSR outlined a fundamental shift in the purpose of the military, from a nominal aim of protecting the Australian continent and its approaches, to being able to deploy “impactful projection” throughout the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Concretely, that means a vast missile acquisition program for all branches of the military.

Meanwhile, the year of the AUKUS subs program has witnessed a further escalation of Australia’s role as a regional attack dog of the US. Labor ministers have continuously toured the region, hectoring, intimidating and bullying nations especially in the Pacific and south-east Asia to turn away from China and to commit to the US war drive.

Military exercises have occurred almost continuously. War games, such as the biannual Talisman Sabre in Australia, have

taken on the character of mock battles against China, which themselves pose the danger of a military clash or miscalculation.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the AUKUS anniversary is the unanimity of the ruling elite and its political representatives behind the war program. That extends from Labor, to the Liberal-National Coalition and the entire official media.

To the extent that there have been objections to AUKUS from within the establishment, the criticisms have been of an entirely tactical character. Former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating and several others have warned against the implications of fully committing to a conflict with China, which remains Australia’s largest trading partner. Keating and those like him do not differ with the US alliance, or even the expansion of militarism. He has called for a vast acquisition of diesel-powered submarines, arguing that they would be a better deal.

The limited disputes within the ruling elite have also found expression in the activities of the Greens, several unions, the fake-left groups and various pacifists. Last year, they established an anti-AUKUS Coalition. As with Keating, this outfit does not oppose militarism or war. Its statements have the character of a warning to the ruling elite that it should not put all of its eggs in the AUKUS basket. At the same time, the anti-AUKUS Coalition serves to divert anger and opposition to the war drive behind rank Australian nationalism.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only political tendency that has opposed AUKUS and the submarine program, from the standpoint of building an international anti-war movement of the working class, directed against the source of war, the capitalist profit-system. Amid the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza, backed by Labor, Washington’s proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, which threatens a nuclear catastrophe, and the ongoing threats against China, this struggle is more urgent than ever.



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