

AUSMIN/AUKUS make Australia staging point for WWII

21 Sept.—The Morrison government's actions and statements in the past week remove all doubt, that the Anglo-American factions still stuck on geopolitical power games and notions of a "unipolar" world intend Australia to be the chief staging point for war with China, should that country continue to refuse to be assimilated into the so-called "rules-based global order". With the outcome of this year's annual Australia-US Ministerial (AUSMIN) consultations and the implications of the just-announced Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) "security" pact, Australia has now explicitly declared China an adversary. Or, as Beijing's official *Global Times* editorialised 16 September, "Australia has turned itself into an adversary of China."

In addition to a long-term nuclear submarine purchase agreement which has garnered the greatest publicity, Australia has agreed to host unlimited numbers and types of American military personnel, weapons and war materiel. China is forced to assume that the latter includes nuclear weapons, and to respond accordingly. Absent a fundamental political shift in Canberra, Washington, or both, there is now no possibility that Australia will not be destroyed, alongside what the late former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser dubbed our "dangerous allies"—the UK and the USA—in the event of a major war.



Australia and the United States have been tied together, with New Zealand, in the ANZUS collective security agreement since 1951. The new AUKUS pact omits New Zealand, which has refused to adopt a hostile posture towards China, in favour of the UK, which unlike the other two AUKUS partners does not even have a Pacific coastline. The deal was announced at a joint press video-conference by US President Joe Biden and Australian and British Prime Ministers Scott Morrison and Boris Johnson on the morning of 16 September (Australian time), after a reported year and a half of planning in Canberra and several months of behind-the-scenes negotiations. No formal memorandum of understanding or other official documentation was released, but in a statement the same day, Morrison, Defence Minister Peter Dutton and Foreign Minister Marise Payne described AUKUS as "an enhanced trilateral security partnership" that will "build on the three nations' longstanding and ongoing bilateral ties ... to significantly deepen cooperation on a range of emerging security and defence capabilities, which will enhance joint capability and interoperability. Initial efforts under AUKUS will focus on cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and additional undersea capabilities."

Full implementation of Australia's headline-grabbing acquisition of nuclear-powered subs is at least two decades away (with interim leasing arrangements possible earlier), but the agenda taken up the following day in the 2021 AUSMIN talks will have immediate and dire consequences. AUSMIN denotes the "2+2" bilateral ministerial talks of Dutton and Payne with their American counterparts, Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Retired senior public servant and former Defence advisor Mike Scrafton [wrote](#) 21 September in the online public policy journal *Pearls and Irritations*, that the agreements (themselves secret) implied in their joint statement effectively constitute "Australia's surreptitious accession as the 51st state of the [USA]. That it has been done without a vote, or even a serious national or parliamentary debate, highlights the accompanying loss of democracy."

According to the statement, the Australian government will, among other things, allow "the rotational deployment of US aircraft of all types in Australia"; facilitate "increasing logistics and sustainment capabilities of US surface and subsurface vessels in Australia"; and "[e]stablish a combined logistics, sustainment, and maintenance enterprise to support high-end warfighting and combined military operations in the region."

Scrafton points out that this means "Australia has effectively surrendered its right to say what kinds of military platforms and weapons can be brought on to, or stationed in, its territory". The implications are grave. First, he notes, "it appears these concessions license the deployment of nuclear weapons to Australia. The US strategic nuclear triad and its tactical nuclear capability is spread across a range of delivery means, including US aircraft, and surface and sub-surface platforms. The joint statement is open-ended; it doesn't exclude longrange nuclear armed bombers, ballistic missile submarines, or the various platforms with tactical nuclear cruise missiles. If Australia is to be a base for sustaining operations it seems inevitable nuclear weapons will enter, transit or be stored here. Australia is too far from the South China Sea to be for launching conventional operations."

The submarine deal

According to the Australian ministers' statement there is not yet a firm plan as to how many or what type of submarines Australia will get, or when. Rather, AUKUS "will focus immediately on identifying the optimal pathway to deliver at least eight nuclear-powered submarines for Australia"; Dutton

subsequently spoke in terms of leasing used British or American subs. The exact plan is to be developed over the next 18 months, during which “Australia, the UK and US will intensely examine the full suite of requirements that underpin nuclear stewardship and demonstrate a clear pathway to becoming a responsible and reliable steward of this sensitive technology.”

Australia’s 2016 deal with France, whereby the majority state-owned shipbuilder Groupe Navale (Naval Group) was to have designed and built 12 “Attack-class” conventionally powered (diesel-electric) submarines, has been cancelled. “This decision was not taken lightly”, Morrison, Dutton and Payne insisted, but “[the] security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region have grown significantly” since 2016, in light of which “it is necessary for Australia to have access to the most capable submarine technology available”.

The French government is furious, not just at the loss of a multi-decade, \$90 billion contract, but at being kept in the dark and even lied to. According to media reports, Morrison had commissioned a secret study on the feasibility of nuclear submarines in late 2019, and had initiated discussions with senior US and UK officials by March of this year. “After an 18-month process”, the 17 September *Australian* reported, the key venue was the G7-plus summit held in Cornwall, UK, in June. Morrison’s first in-person bilateral discussion with Biden was “scaled up” at short notice to include Johnson, and “AUKUS was sealed” at that time.

Until just hours before AUKUS was publicly unveiled last week, however, Canberra led the French to believe that the Attack-class project would continue. Morrison personally perpetuated the ruse during a day of talks with French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris on 15 June, three days after the G7 meeting. And on 30 August Dutton and Payne, in a joint statement with their French counterparts Florence Parly and Jean-Yves Le Drian, after the inaugural France-Australia 2+2 Ministerial Consultations, declared that they had “agreed on the next steps for strengthening our bilateral defence cooperation as well as our industrial partnerships with the aim of ... deepening the enhanced strategic partnership that has united France and Australia since 2017. *To this end, they committed to strengthening industrial and capability-centred cooperation and underpinned the importance of the future submarine program.*” (Emphasis added.)

Two weeks later the Attack-class program was pronounced dead. “It is really a stab in the back”, Foreign Minister Le Drian told *France Info* radio after the AUKUS announcement, according to the 17 September *Sydney Morning Herald*. “We built a relationship of trust with Australia, and this trust was betrayed and I’m angry today, with a lot of bitterness, about this breach [of contract]. This is not done between allies.” Macron took the extraordinary step of recalling France’s ambassadors to Australia and the USA—though not to Britain, which Le Drian (incorrectly) dismissed as a “fifth wheel” in the present situation.

Morrison has been at pains to stress that switching to nuclear-powered subs will *not* jump-start Australia’s own nuclear industry. The line Morrison and Dutton have fed the media is that whilst the practically unlimited range and superior performance of nuclear submarines (which can stay submerged indefinitely because they do not need to take on air as a diesel boat does) would always have been preferable, maintaining and refuelling their reactors would require capabilities that Australia not only does not have, but which are illegal under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. That law prohibits any action involving the construction or operation of a nuclear power station or a nuclear fuel fabrication, enrichment, or reprocessing facility. The advanced reactors the United States has now offered, by contrast, supposedly require neither fuel nor maintenance during the boat’s projected service life.

Morrison et al. stated that “The Government’s *intention* is to build the nuclear-powered submarines in South Australia [emphasis added], maximising the use of Australian workers”. Given the Morrison government’s past form, however, we can expect this “intention” to last until just after the next federal election; then local construction will be put in the too-hard basket and the new subs simply ordered off the US or UK production line.

Ceding sovereignty, boosting instability

Chinese state media were quick to denounce AUKUS and point out that what it will bring Australia is a further loss of sovereignty and a place as a target on war-planners’ maps. The above-cited Global Times editorial was accompanied by an article headlined “Nuke sub deal could make Australia ‘potential nuclear war target’”. Another column in the paper called the submarine deal “the clearest indication of Canberra’s support for Washington’s idea of an international system to contain China’s economic rise.” It added, “[T]he stakes are just too high for Canberra. Australia could face the most dangerous consequence of being cannon fodder in the event of a military showdown in the region.” Moreover, “There is no path to future prosperity for an Australia which chooses to isolate itself from the region’s largest economy.” Such warnings cannot be dismissed as propaganda, as the more level-headed among analysts in the West, as well as senior political figures in Australia itself have made similar observations. Former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, in comments published 18 September, dubbed the submarine deal “a story of geopolitically driven military procurement gone mad”.

Former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating, in a 20 September column for *WAtoday*, charged that

the deal ties Australia to any American military engagement against China: “The announced agreement between the United States, Britain and Australia for Australia to move to a fleet of US-supplied nuclear submarines will amount to a lock-in of our military equipment and forces with those of the USA, with only one underlying objective: the ability to act collectively in any military engagement by the USA against China. This arrangement would witness a further dramatic loss of Australian sovereignty, as material dependency on the USA would rob Australia of any freedom or choice in any engagement it may deem appropriate.”

Kevin Rudd, also a former PM and now President and CEO of the Asia Society emphasised to CNBC TV interviewers 21 September (US time), that there is “a range of views in Australia” on AUKUS’s submarine component, and not yet a clear “across-the-board bipartisan consensus”. He noted that Australians have raised concerns about violation of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—an issue because the subs in questions could be armed with nuclear-capable missiles—and the “operational independence” of the Royal Australian Navy. Rudd also said that not only are the French aggrieved, but the foreign minister of Indonesia had raised to him concerns about the implications for “peace and stability” in the region.

Among the most lucid critiques of AUKUS to date comes from Hugh White, professor emeritus of strategic studies at the Australian National University. As head of strategic analysis at the Office of National Assessments in 1992-93 and deputy secretary of defence for strategy and intelligence in 1995- 2000, culminating in his chief authorship of the 2000 Defence White Paper, White himself played a leading role in formulating a defence policy centred upon maintaining US hegemony in the Asia-Pacific as a force against China. Whether because the results are not as he intended, or his views have changed in the meantime, in the past few years White has been an increasingly outspoken critic of Australia’s ever deepening assimilation into the Anglo-American war machine.

Writing in the 18 September *Saturday Paper*, White opined that as “crazy” as the *Attack*-class project had been, from every standpoint the new plan is worse. “It will make the replacement of the Royal Australian Navy’s fleet of *Collins*-class boats riskier, costlier and slower”, he wrote, and “it deepens our commitment to the United States’ military confrontation of China, which has little chance of success and carries terrifying risks.”

White wrote that despite its expense and complexity, nuclear propulsion does make sense for nuclear-armed countries that operate a submarine fleet. Other than for nuclear-armed ballistic missile subs and the “hunter-killer” attack subs designed to track and destroy them, he explained, nuclear subs’ “advantages ... do not outweigh their much greater costs.” (Indeed, nuclear-armed countries such as Russia and China maintain fleets of conventional subs for that reason.) Therefore if, as Morrison asserts, Australia’s submarine fleet “were intended primarily to defend Australia and our closer neighbours, then there is no way we’d consider nuclear propulsion”, White wrote. “But *the navy decided many years ago that the primary role for our new boats should be to operate off the coast of China in co-operation with the US Navy* [emphasis added], and the government has eagerly gone along. That required a submarine that was bigger and more complex than any conventional sub in the world, with attributes only found in nuclear-powered boats.” The *Attack*-class was an attempt to solve this self-made problem. Instead, the USA and Britain have stepped in to solve it for us.

By Richard Bardon, Australian Alert Service, 22 September 2021