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AUKUS: The Optimal Pathway, One Year In

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SYNOPSIS

The AUKUS project to supply Australia with nuclear-powered submarines is developing fast but faces many obstacles if its stated aims are to be achieved.

COMMENTARY

The original AUKUS deal for Australia to acquire six to eight nuclear-propelled but conventionally armed submarines (SSNs) in the 2040s was signed back in September 2021 by the then leaders of the three countries that form the trilateral security pact, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. However, it is now a year since the current leaders of the three countries met in San Diego to agree and confirm an “Optimal Pathway” for the way ahead.



It has been a year since Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese met with US president Joe Biden and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak at the AUKUS Optimal Pathway in San Diego, 13 March 2023. Optimal Pathway comprises three phases and aims to restabilise the Indo-Pacific region through supplying Australia nuclear-powered submarines. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Stages of the Plan

The Optimal Pathway comprises three phases. The first is to set up the so-called Submarine Rotation Force – West (SRF-W). Starting in 2027, one British Astute-class SSN and up to four US Navy SSNs will make regular use of Australian facilities in order to maximise their presence in the wider Western Pacific. Additionally, SRF-W will provide the Australians with opportunities to learn how to maintain and operate SSNs. Demonstrating intent, US and British SSNs have recently been visiting Australia. Eventually, a new submarine support base is to be constructed for this purpose, possibly at Port Kembla in Wollongong, New South Wales.

Phase two should see Australia buying three to five Virginia-class SSNs from the Americans in the early 2030s. These will tide the Australian navy over a gap that would otherwise appear in their fleet when their current Collins class of diesel-propelled submarines have to be decommissioned, after planned upgrading. The extra two Virginias would only be bought if the replacement SSNs are delayed.

Phase three should involve the final delivery of the SSN-AUKUS to both the British and Australian navies in the early 2040s to replace the Australian navy's Virginia-class SSNs and the British Astute-class SSNs. Construction of these new submarines will incorporate US technology but will take place in the United Kingdom and Australia.

The original 2021 deal also contains many other aspects of defence cooperation between the three navies, which are being expanded, such as the recent announcement that the three (and possibly New Zealand) are pursuing common hypersonic developments and a common control system for naval drones. Even without these extra commitments, the core aspiration is immensely complex and ambitious.

Desirability and Practicality

Inevitably, the SSN deal has attracted criticism on two separate fronts. The first is the desirability of the project. The second is its practicality.

China, of course, considers itself to be the target of the SSN-AUKUS project (although this has never been explicitly stated by any of the participants). It accuses them of having a “cold war mentality” which threatens the peace and stability of the area. Malaysia and Indonesia have expressed some muted sympathy for this point of view. Otherwise, most other countries in the region, such as Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand, have either been silent on the matter or talked of cooperating with AUKUS on the plan. Even France has expressed an interest.

In Australia itself, some trade union leaders have condemned the project as aggressive and opposed the construction of an SRF-W submarine base. In some other quarters, there are very technical reservations about the deal's implications for nuclear proliferation, although these are not likely to be considered insuperable by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The main worry then is about the prospect that AUKUS will increase the securitisation of international relations in the Indo-Pacific region and encourage its coalescence into

two competing blocs, which nobody wants. The usual riposte is that in the light of both China's own more assertive behaviour and the extensive and independent naval modernisation programmes being conducted by many other countries in the region, AUKUS is more to be seen as a symptom of the problem, rather than a cause.

Additionally, however, there are substantive concerns about the deal's necessity and practicality. The professional argument for the SSN-AUKUS is that, among many other things, the submarines allow fast and currently undetectable transit to distant theatres of operation. Diesel-propelled submarines cannot achieve this level of invisibility, given their need to schnorkel to replenish batteries. In an era of ever-increasing means of pinpoint ocean surveillance, lack of invisibility is a major deficiency. Overall, the SSN-AUKUS class is expected to treble the time on station that the Collins class allows and greatly increase its strategic effect.

But even if the need for nuclear propulsion is accepted (and not everyone does), the project faces very many challenges. All three participants are fully fledged democracies, and indeed, such cultural affinity is one of the things that binds them together. But at the same time, their democratic proclivities mean that they are especially vulnerable to policy changes in a project that will last over two decades.

In both Australia and the United Kingdom, the main parties are fully committed to the policy. In the United Kingdom, however, the Ukraine war and the Russian threat has become a key concern, especially for a country taking the lead in rallying support for Kyiv. Already there is widespread acceptance of a greater need to invest in more sustainable defence, but much of this projected need is directed at the immediate demands of the European theatre.

Moreover, whatever government emerges from the general election, widely expected to be held later this year, the United Kingdom will indeed face a very demanding budgetary situation. Nonetheless, at the moment, there is no sign at all of any significant wavering on the need for a British tilt towards the Pacific in general and AUKUS in particular.

The main parties in Australia likewise support the project, although Paul Keating (a former prime minister) has contributed to what the *Financial Times* has called the "squawkus about AUKUS" in the governing Labor Party. Concerns have been raised about continued American support, especially if Mr Trump does indeed win the November election. MAGA ("Make America Great Again") Republicans in particular, with their isolationist tendencies, may prove hesitant about increasing Australia's security if there is a chance that this may weaken their own security. Others argue that the immediate future should be the priority, not the longer-term one.

American worries, indeed, tend to focus less on grand principle and more on technical issues of feasibility, and especially on the deal's possibly adverse effects on the US submarine fleet. The US Navy has already pushed back the arrival of its SSN-X (the US Navy's own alternative to the SSN-AUKUS) by at least five years and is struggling to acquire Virginia-class SSNs at the rate its plans require. This is mainly because of limitations in its defence industries, especially Electric Boat and Huntington-Ingalls Industries, its two main submarine builders.

For this reason, greater investment into building yards tops the priority list of the supplementary budgetary request before an unfortunately politically polarised US Congress. In the meantime, the production rate of Virginia SSNs is projected to fall in the short term rather than rise. Sceptics naturally wonder whether it will in fact be possible for the US Navy to transfer three, still less five, precious Virginias to the Australians in the 2030s.

To help out, the Australians have promised billions of dollars to subsidise both the American and the British submarine industries, while also investing heavily in their own. Additionally, they have supported British activism on Ukraine, in part by supporting the UK/Latvian initiative to supply thousands of drones to Kyiv. This is evidence of a shared and long-standing strategic outlook that is unlikely to change.

In short, to succeed in its stated aim of helping to re-stabilise the Indo-Pacific region, this very ambitious project will have to surmount a range of hurdles over the next 20 years. Whether it does and the effects that it has remain to be seen.

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