



AUKUS: its strategic and diplomatic implications

As outlined in Defence News (p. 3), Australia, Britain and America announced an enhanced trilateral security partnership, AUKUS, on 16 September 2021. AUKUS is not a new defence alliance. Rather, the three partners have agreed to deepen sharing of defence technology and increase associated collaborative research and development.

Initially, AUKUS will focus on cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and undersea capabilities, and on Australia acquiring long-range strike capabilities. These initiatives are consistent with Australia's strategic priorities (Defence 2020a: 33; Defence 2020b).

As the first major initiative under AUKUS, Australia intends to acquire eight nuclear-powered submarines and has cancelled its Attack-class submarine programme which was to have provided us with 12 conventionally-powered submarines. *Prima facie*, this decision is

inconsistent with Australia's enunciated strategic priorities on four grounds: our shortened strategic warning time (Defence 2020a: 14); the defence planning focus on our immediate region (Defence 2020: 21); our need to strengthen defence and diplomatic ties (Defence 2020a: 22, 33); and our need for greater strategic independence (*i.e.* less reliance on the United States). Let us consider each in more detail.

Strategic Warning Time

Current strategic guidance states: "Australia can no longer rely on a timely warning ahead of conflict occurring" (Defence 2020: 14). Hence, one could understand the contract to build sequentially 12 Attack-class submarines being cancelled if it were to be replaced by a contract to immediately acquire 12 equivalent conventionally-powered submarines 'off-the-shelf'.

That, though, is not the plan and may not be a realistic option. Rather, according to Chief of Navy Vice Admiral Mike Noonan in evidence to Senate Estimates on 15

October, the existing six Collins-class submarines (due to be retired beginning this decade) may need to undergo two life-of-type extensions (essentially, rebuilds) to maintain them in service into the 2050s – this to prevent a capability gap opening before they are progressively replaced by the proposed nuclear-powered submarines¹.

So, instead of acquiring equivalent submarines earlier than originally planned, we will now acquire the Attack-class replacements a decade later than intended. While this is at odds with the reduced strategic warning time, there may not be a better option now that the French contracts have been cancelled.

Australia's Geostrategic Focus

Although the French contracts were problematic, Navy advised Senate Estimates that the contracts were cancelled for unspecified strategic reasons, not for contract non-performance. The strategic reasons remain unclear.

Much commentary has assumed that nuclear-powered boats (SSNs) are superior to conventionally-powered boats (SSKs). Generally, SSNs² are not stealthier, but are larger, faster, have larger crews and can operate submerged for several months. They are better-suited for operations in deep, open oceans. SSKs are smaller, slower, have smaller crews, and need to surface regularly to charge batteries, although newer battery technology has greatly extended their underwater time. They are better-suited for littoral operations (in shallower waters and confined spaces *e.g.* archipelagic areas).

Consistent with a geostrategic focus on our immediate region (Defence 2020: 21), it is understood that a key factor in the decision to acquire 12 SSKs as part of an Australian maritime defence strategy was to have a sovereign capability, independent of allies, to conduct surveillance of, and deny passage through, the key choke points of the Indonesian-Melanesian archipelago, such as the Makassar, Sunda and Lombok Straits. A second factor was the need to be able to fully maintain the 12 SSKs in Australia.

The decision now to acquire eight SSNs suggests it is intended to operate them much further from home in conjunction with the United States Indo-Pacific Fleet in northern Indo-Pacific waters, a second-order strategic priority (Defence 2020: 21-24). Possible tasks could include protection of maritime lines-of-communication and surveillance/denial of choke points in the First Island Chain. With the boats' nuclear propulsion systems relying on maintenance in Britain or America (assuming that, by then, we still did not have a sovereign nuclear industry), their maintenance during a conflict could be problematic³.

Could SSNs be substituted for SSKs in sea denial of the immediate approaches to Australia? Yes, SSNs can

be used for littoral operations, but eight boats only may be insufficient to constitute a credible deterrent.

Regional Defence and Diplomatic Ties

Current strategic guidance states that: "Defence will continue to invest in relationships, collaboration and partnerships across the Indo-Pacific and globally" (Defence 2020: 22); and "... build Australia's partnerships and influence in the region" (Defence 2020: 33).

Australia cancelled the contracts with France to build the Attack-class boats and did so ineptly. France is not only a European power with its own independent nuclear deterrent, it also is an Indo-Pacific power. An intention of the contracts had been enhanced co-operation with the French in our region. Instead, the contract terminations have damaged relations with the French (and the European Union).

The decision to pursue the acquisition of nuclear boats also unsettled other regional allies, the Malaysians and Indonesians in particular. Attempts have been made since to explain the decision to them, but Indonesia has not been mollified and wider diplomatic damage has resulted.

Greater Strategic Independence

The ANZUS Treaty remains the bedrock of our defence strategy (Defence 2016: 41). Over the last five years, however, there has been debate about the need for Australia to assert greater independence in strategic decision-making, especially in deciding whether or not to go to war whenever the United States does – this flexibility is afforded under the ANZUS Treaty. In part, this desire for greater independence has been triggered by the isolationist tendencies to re-emerge in America during the Trump presidency, coupled with the uncertainty engendered by America's decision, made unilaterally, to withdraw from Afghanistan and the withdrawal's chaotic execution in 2021.

If we were to build nuclear-powered submarines using United States technology, which were intended to deploy operationally primarily with the United States Indo-Pacific Fleet and for which major maintenance could be undertaken only in America, our ability to take strategic decisions independently of the United States could be severely constrained.

Where to from Here?

The AUKUS defence-technology partnership, with its initial focus on cyber, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and undersea capabilities, with Australia also acquiring long-range strike capabilities, is a welcome strategic step forward. It also signals to the world our allies' confidence in Australia as a reliable strategic ally and technological partner.

(Continued on page 18)

¹Admiral Noonan did not state the basis for his belief that the Collins' hulls could withstand two rebuilds.

²SSN is the United States Navy hull classification symbol for a nuclear-powered attack submarine – the *SS* denotes a submarine and the *N* denotes nuclear power. *SSK* is the symbol for a diesel-electric submarine specialised for anti-submarine duties – the *K* denotes a hunter-killer.

³Virginia-class SSNs employ a life-of-the-ship nuclear reactor fuelled by highly-enriched uranium (HEU) with a service-life of 33+ years, but in-service maintenance can become necessary, *e.g.* to repair damage. Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty considerations may constrain Australia's development of a commercial HEU industry.

OPINION

(Continued from page 4)

Having cancelled the contracts with France to build 12 SSKs in Australia and with little chance of acquiring replacements more quickly 'off-the-shelf,' we now plan to acquire eight SSNs. Vice Admiral Jonathan Mead is leading a task force to develop that plan, hopefully within 18 months. He advised a Senate estimates hearing on 27 October that he favoured a mature design in order to get a boat in the water sooner and that he was leaning in favour of the British Astute-class SSN as it was smaller and cheaper than the competing American Virginia-class SSN, had a significantly smaller crew and could be acquired more quickly. This option also may afford us greater strategic independence, but we may need more than eight boats if they are to constitute a credible independent deterrent.

Much diplomatic work also is needed to rebuild our regional partnerships, especially with the French. This may take considerable time.

David Leece⁴

References

Defence (2016). *2016 defence white paper* (Department of Defence: Canberra).

Defence (2020a). *2020 defence strategic update* (Department of Defence: Canberra).

Defence (2020b). *2020 force structure plan* (Department of Defence: Canberra).

⁴Dr David Leece, editor of *United Service*, is co-chair of the Institute's Special Interest Group on Strategy. These are his personal views.