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Perspectives

AUKUS and nuclear submarines: More questions than answers

September 18 2021

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On September 16 Australia announced a trilateral security partnership with the US and the UK – 'AUKUS' – with its first major initiative being the Australian acquisition of eight nuclear-powered submarines using US and UK technology.

While the countries maintained the partnership was not directed at any one country, it is clear it has the People's Republic of China (PRC) at front of mind.

Minilateral cooperation, although not without pitfalls, 'used deftly and judiciously' has the potential to be an effective diplomatic and strategic tool. To this end, AUKUS is an important development.

But some of the commentary that has erupted in the announcement's wake is overly excitable – indeed, overly laudatory in some quarters – with Prime Minister Scott Morrison's own assessment leading the way.

In expounding on the announcement, the Prime Minister labelled the partnership 'the single greatest initiative to achieve [the protection of Australia's national security interests] since the ANZUS alliance itself'. This proclamation is now a familiar refrain, with the Prime Minister having in March this year used precisely the same formulation to describe the elevation of the Quad to leader-level talks: 'the most significant thing to have occurred to protect Australia's security and sovereignty since ANZUS.'

The Prime Minister's pronouncement may ultimately transpire, but uncorking the champagne is premature. The times call for more circumspection, and for the initiative's potential limitations to be borne in mind. Will the AUKUS gambit, on balance, enhance Australia's ability to effectively deal with the PRC? Some questions remain.

First, the question of longer-term consequences for Australian strategic independence. The death knell has clearly sounded for the decades-long Australian maintenance of a balancing act between its alliance with the US and relationship with the PRC. The Prime Minister only less than a year ago was continuing to cleave to this, stating that Australia's preference was 'not to be forced into any binary choices.' That choice has now been made. And in so doing, Australia has also effectively rendered itself captive to external high-end technology providers on one major defence front, with the US also likely to view the Australian program an effective extension of their own. The decision assumes that Canberra's priorities will continue to align near-perfectly with Washington's, locking Australia in to act in concert with their 'forever' partners and accept the decision-making constraints that come with it.

Second, the question of the effectiveness of the new submarine program as a deterrent against the PRC. Defence Minister Peter Dutton has stated that he did not think a military conflict over Taiwan 'should be discounted'. If the 'drums of war' do indeed beat, if there is a 'high likelihood' of conflict with the PRC, will the first of the Australian nuclear submarines coming into service 'before the end of the next decade' suffice?

There will be a period where Australia has no submarines in operation. By one estimate, the PRC is slated to grow its current fleet of 66 submarines to 76 by 2030. The rush towards the announceable means that an interrogation of the viability and the specifics of the program has not as yet occurred. Instead, the pact commits itself to identify an 'optimal pathway' within an 18 month period. It has also skirted, for the moment, discussion of binding mechanisms. Where to for Australia should American positioning shift under a new administration?

Third, the question of the partnership's reception in the region and the divisions it may create. While Singapore and Japan have welcomed the decision, for example, Indonesia has expressed serious reservations. And an exclusively Anglo-Saxon grouping purporting to take the lead in the promotion of 'security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific', confidently declaring the partnership to be one 'that will benefit all in our region', may, for some countries, bring with it some uncomfortable echoes of a past that Australia is trying to place behind it as it attempts to forge closer relations with its regional neighbours.

Fourth, the question of how the decision will impact on broader transatlantic strategy and coalition-building with European partners to balance the PRC. It has, of course, enraged France, presently the main European actor in the region. The manner in which the matter was handled, with Prime Minister Morrison in June 'recruiting' French President Emmanuel Macron 'to help salvage' Australia's submarine deal with French builder Naval Group and with the inaugural Australia-France 2+2 Ministerial Consultations on August 30 having centred on deepening trust and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, has made a significant dent in French goodwill towards Australia. Canberra may be hoping that the smoothing over of relations with Tokyo after rejecting their submarine bid in 2016 set an instructive past precedent, but the present situation is shaping up to be a wound harder to salve. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told French radio that '[t]his is not done between allies', describing it as 'a knife in the back'. And on September 17 France took the major diplomatic step of recalling its ambassadors to Australia and the US, usually an act reserved for powers deemed hostile.

That the proposal was reportedly first put to US President Joe Biden by Prime Minister Morrison and Prime Minister Boris Johnson in June and 'was never raised with Donald Trump' seems to indicate that there might not have been sufficient consideration given to these questions, 18 months internal Australian planning notwithstanding. Given its significance in terms of diplomatic signalling and the fact that missteps have already been made with respect to past Australian decisions on submarines, the secretive nature of discussions, the lack of extensive consultation (an 'extremely small working group' pondered the matter) and debate, and the short lead time points to a lack of due diligence.

That these points are only being debated after the fact make it probable that Australia's abrupt shift in policy gears will not turn out to be the catholicon for its strategic woes.

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She is editor of UTS:ACRI's commentary series, *Perspectives*. Her work has been published in the *Sydney Morning Herald, The Guardian*, the *South China Morning Post, The Diplomat, The Conversation, Australian Foreign Affairs*, the Lowy Institute's *Interpreter*, the Australian Institute of International Affairs' *Australian Outlook*, and the Council on Foreign Relations' *Asia Unbound* amongst other outlets, and she has contributed chapters to edited volumes. She is a lawyer admitted to the Supreme Court of New South Wales and has previously held research and project positions in Australian departmental, ministerial and Senate offices, at state and federal levels.