

AUKUS Nuclear Submarines: Accelerating the Sleepwalking to War with China

Nuclear-powered submarines are designed for one purpose: attack. We must recognize the perils of continuing down this dangerous path.

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The March 13 Biden-Albanese-Sunak summit in San Diego to demonstrate alliance solidarity and to sign the multi-billion AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, US) nuclear submarine deal accelerated the pace of the U.S. and China sleepwalking toward catastrophic war. Compounding the dangers that came with the creation of the alliance in 2021 as part of the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific military buildup, the new deal also adds to the mountain of obstacles blocking the way to the U.S.-Chinese cooperation that is essential if the climate emergency is to be reversed, the world's nuclear arms races stanchied, and if the planet's two most technologically advanced nations collaborating to prevent pandemics and discover cancer cures.

The San Diego deal was designed to seal the southern flank of what Chinese **President Xi Jinping** describes as the West's "all-round containment, encirclement, and suppression" of China. Initially, the U.S. is to sell Australia three and possibly more nuclear powered and nuclear-capable Virginia class submarines in the 2030s. A decade later the U.S. subs will be augmented with nuclear-powered submarines built by Britain and Australia with advanced U.S. technologies. In addition to deepening dangerous military tensions and provocations across the Indo-Pacific where an accident or miscalculation could trigger World War III. At an estimated cost of \$268 to \$368 billion, the submarine deal is a massive windfall for the three powers' military-industrial complexes at the cost of spending for climate resilience and essential human needs. And even before Australia takes command of the most advanced U.S. and British nuclear submarines, Australian harbors will host U.S. and U.K. nuclear-powered and *nuclear-armed* submarines as that land down under becomes a forward-based repair and maintenance hub for the United States' seventh fleet.

To be clear, Beijing is not innocent in this. The new cold war era is defined by a classic

Thucydides Trap, the inevitable tensions between rising and declining powers that in most cases—see most recently World War I and World War II—have climaxed with catastrophic conflicts. In this case, with its imperial claims to more than 80% of the resource-rich and strategically vital South China Sea, its occupation of Spratly and Parcel Islands claimed by six other nations, and its military modernization including its nuclear arsenal, China is behaving like most rising great powers.

Despite its calls for “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security” and for others to honor the United Nations, it is not adverse to seizing others’ maritime territories or violating international law to create a buffer zone or to revise, if not revolutionize, the rules of the road. But Xi had a point in decrying U.S. encirclement and containment. Building on the Obama-era U.S. Pivot to Asia, the Biden administration has deepened and expanded its alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia; expanded its military bases in Guam; and deepened military cooperation with India via the QUAD (U.S., Japan, Australia and India) collaboration.

My friend, the Australian peace and anti-bases movement leader Hannah Middleton, was unsparing in her opposition to AUKUS deal, writing that “Prime Minister Albanese and Defence Minister Marles, like their predecessors Morrison and Dutton, are now exposed as traitors and agents of a foreign power. They are willing to sacrifice Australia’s economy, to risk massive military and civilian casualties for the United States to retain dominance, economically and militarily in the Indo-Pacific. They are prepared to risk WW3 and the possibility of it going nuclear with devastating worldwide consequences?”

Looking back at history, it is worth recalling that with its 1898 conquests of the Philippines, Guam, and Samoa and the annexation of Hawaii, the United States launched its Asia-Pacific empire. Unlike the war to defeat Nazi Germany, the Pacific theater of World War II was an imperial competition between Japan, the U.S., and Britain. Japan lost. Britannia no longer ruled the waves. And the Pacific Ocean became an “American Lake,” patrolled by the U.S. Seventh Fleet, and reinforced by hundreds of U.S. military bases in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Guam, and other U.S. protectorates. This guaranteed U.S. access to East Asian markets and labor along with the implicit threat that U.S. naval and air power could enforce blockades and strangle rival economies, especially China’s.

Beginning with the sacrifice of 60,000 Australian lives in the futility of WWI, the dispatch of troops to fight in the Korean War, and its brutal complicity in Washington’s Indochina War, the Australian government has long served as Anglo-America’s poodle. Its hosting of the Pine Gap intelligence base has given Australia a role in U.S. preparations for fighting a nuclear war. And the expansion of Holt Naval base in Perth and the permanent deployment of thousands of U.S. marines in Darwin (both in northern Australia) reinforce U.S. control of the strategically vital Malacca Strait, with their presence also challenging Chinese ambitions in the Indian Ocean.

Now comes AUKUS to reinforce U.S. Indo-Pacific hegemony. In addition to augmenting U.S. and Japanese military plans to bottle up the Chinese Navy within the first island chain, AUKUS begins to harness Australia into the first stage of a possible and certainly catastrophic war for Taiwan. In anticipation of a possible Chinese blockade of what Beijing perceives as its renegade province, U.S. war planners anticipate that the PLA will establish a naval blockade around Taiwan in the tradition of siege warfare. The Pentagon’s answer? Breaking the blockade with its and its allies’ submarine supremacy. (To calm Chinese fears

the Australian government denies that it has yet to commit to defend Taiwan in case of war.)

AUKUS is the latest iteration of U.S. campaigning to maintain military supremacy to reinforce its declining Indo-Pacific hegemony. In response to the 1996 Taiwan crisis, when President Clinton dispatched two U.S. aircraft carrier fleets through the Taiwan Strait (and terrifying Chinese leadership as a result), Beijing has invested heavily in building a 21st military and laid its unjust claim to more than 80% of the South China/West Philippine Sea thus challenging U.S. Pacific hegemony, and built a Navy as it competes for control of the Inner Island Chain. The U.S. response has been a redoubled campaign to “contain” China, augmenting U.S. fire and economic power with expanded and deepened alliances.

First came Obama’s “Pivot to Asia,” the commitment to deploy 60% of U.S. naval and air power in what is now called the Indo-Pacific region, then Trump’s China-bashing, provocative assaults on the (Taiwan-related) One China Policy and “Freedom of Navigation” forays in territorially disputed waters. Now the Biden administration’s National Security Strategy is targeted primarily against China.

There are also questions and a debate about the nuclear implications of the deal. The three allies insist that while the submarines will be nuclear-powered, they will not be nuclear-armed, and Australia’s foreign minister claims that the navies of a “number of other countries” have nuclear-powered submarines. Missing from that claim is that the number is five, and that those five nations are the P-5 nuclear weapons states.

Beijing is not having it, claiming that the deal violates the “object and purpose” of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and that it violates the NPT’s requirement that exchange of nuclear equipment be only “for the peaceful use of nuclear energy.” There are also fears that the AUKUS submarine precedent will inspire other nations to field nuclear-powered submarines, thereby increasing the likelihood of nuclear weapons proliferation. And, as the renowned physicist Frank Von Hippel report reminds us, nuclear-powered submarines are designed for one purpose: attack.

However, as the Quincy Institute reports, in 1972 a “submarine loophole” was inserted into the NPT. The deployment of these extraordinarily deadly and dangerous war machines may not violate international law. But they do severely undermine the chances that we can escape what Australian Ambassador Kevin Rudd describes as “the avoidable war.”

As Hannah Middleton’s writing indicates, the AUKUS submarine deal has not been unanimously welcomed in Australia. Citing the monumental cost of the deal, former Australian Prime Minister Keating has termed the agreement “the worst deal in all history.”

The Australian peace movement is mobilizing to block implementation of the deal, focusing on the dangers of ratcheting up tensions with China, the submarines’ staggering costs, and the need to pursue common security diplomacy across the Asia Pacific. We in the U.S. are also called to oppose AUKUS and the submarine deal, to begin finding ways to act in solidarity with our Australian partners. And, rather than sleepwalk into World War III, we would do well to at least test China’s commitments to common security by prioritizing diplomacy instead of thoughtlessly and dogmatically pursuing the chimera of military domination.

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