

Marrickville Peace Group

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SUBMISSION TO THE PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO AUKUS

Addressing the questions raised as the Inquiry's 'Scope':-

What is the likelihood of AUKUS submarines being delivered on time and on budget?

Many reports indicate little likelihood of the AUKUS submarines being delivered on time and on budget.

The major 'sticking-point' is the inability of US shipyards to raise their annual production level to one that satisfies US requirements. If the US is unable to provide its own navy with the required number of SSNs, the President would be unlikely to authorise their transfer to Australian ownership.

Given changing geopolitical realities, does AUKUS enhance or jeopardise Australia's security?

The Australian continent, being an island, is inherently very safe. Any invading force would be faced with enormous (and probably insurmountable) logistical problems. Crossing open, ocean water presents great difficulties. (For these, logistical reasons the Japanese, at the height of their power during World War Two, decided against any attempt to invade Australia.)

Its geography is Australia's greatest security. 'Changing geopolitical realities' make little difference.

However, AUKUS does establish Australia as an aggressive nation. It cements Australia's military alignment with the USA, as that nation seeks 'full spectrum dominance'. Furthermore, the project appears to rest on the misguided premise that it is needed because China holds malicious intentions towards Australia. There is absolutely no evidence that China holds any enmity towards Australia. However, in the event of the USA and China coming into actual, military conflict, there is little doubt that Australia would become involved. In such a scenario, China might, indeed, become an enemy. Although an invasion would be highly unlikely, all military facilities, especially those directly connected to the USA, could become targets for attack. Trade between Australia and China would cease. The economic consequences could be massive.

On balance it would seem that AUKUS jeopardises Australia's security.

What are the costs/impacts of AUKUS on Australia's economy, workforce, industry, and research sectors, and what are the opportunity costs for other national priorities?

AUKUS is definitely an extremely ambitious project, requiring the application of very significant human resources. That the project is being so eagerly supported by tertiary educational institutions is evidence for this. However, the minds being trained and the skills being developed have the sole purpose of creating and supporting industries that have destruction as their end product. Meanwhile there are many pressing, constructive needs that Australian society seems unable to meet – needs such as health-care (including care for the disabled), housing, transport and education. Besides, the imminent climate crisis presents many, more pressing needs than possible, future military ones.

AUKUS represents an enormous opportunity cost, diverting resources away from where they are more needed. For example, the engineering skills required for AUKUS could have been directed into designing and creating an up-to-date railway system for the country. This would have enormous social benefits, whereas the resources diverted to AUKUS will only have real value in a situation of open conflict. The AUKUS project only provides benefit for a very small proportion of the population.

Can AUKUS nuclear accidents in port or Australian waters be absolutely averted or contained, can nuclear waste be stored safely, and what are the environmental and community impacts, especially for First Nations peoples?

Short answer – Accidents cannot be absolutely averted.

The waste storage problem is not resolved. No plan has yet been put forward. In every likelihood, whatever 'solution' is eventually decided upon, it will have deleterious effect on the community living near the site – which probably means the local First Nations community.

The AUKUS option, involving the use of Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) fuel is more risky than alternative systems using LEU. If Australia must 'go nuclear' (although this is certainly not an imperative), the LEU path would be preferable, as the waste storage and treatment problems are significantly less risky.

HEU waste needs stable and secure storage for a period of time that stretches beyond the imagination of any government.

What is the status of transparency, public consultation, and parliamentary oversight regarding AUKUS decisions?

In a word, “appalling”.

From the outset AUKUS has been presented to the public as *fait accompli*, giving no possibility for community input. At the very least, there should have been debate in parliament before such a huge decision was taken. We (the public) still have incomplete knowledge of the agreement between the three parties to the project.

The Agreement among the Government of Australia, the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the Government of the United States of America for Cooperation Related to Naval Nuclear Propulsion states that “55. No public consultation has been undertaken, given the classified scope of consultations between the Parties on the Agreement, including matters relating to national security and operational capability.”

This means that the only publicly available agreement between the parties is limited to the technical details of transferring nuclear technology, and that these are not subject to community consultation.

In a properly functioning democracy, there would have been widespread consultation and discussion about ‘national security’ and the merits or otherwise of such a grandiose scheme. Yet there has been no opportunity for concerned members of the community to engage in dialogue with those who have made or are making the decisions.

We note that the matter was not even able to be discussed on the floor of the recent ALP conference. It would be reasonable to conclude that debate on the topic was actively suppressed by Party leaders.

All in all, it has been a travesty of process.

Could the technological advancements of AUKUS Pillar 2 be achieved through other mechanisms?

(No answer provided.)

What is the strategic rationale for Australia’s commitment to AUKUS?

The strategic rationale appears to rest on the presumption that Australia is unable defend itself, so needs the help of old allies (the USA and the UK). However, the rationale leaps from there to the belief that the answer to this lack of capability is the acquisition of ‘high end’ weaponry that will enable the nation to ‘project power’ at a great distance from its shores. These two approaches are not compatible. Are we weak and unable to defend ourselves, or are we so strong that can presume to attack distant targets?

Also underlying the strategic rationale is the notion of “The China Threat”, so beloved of certain mainstream media. Indeed, the whole AUKUS idea could have been formed on the premise of China presenting a military threat to Australia. This rationale has no basis in reality. China is Australia’s greatest trading partner and has shown no overt signs of enmity whatever. Yet many aspects of AUKUS 1 suggests that China is the target.

However, it has also been argued that the real rationale for AUKUS is simply the desire of political and military leaders to re-affirm their absolute commitment to the strategic objectives of the USA, over and above Australia’s national interests.

Whatever the ‘real’ rationale, one with acceptable, coherent – or even plausible - reasoning has not yet been forthcoming.

What are the impacts of AUKUS on the operational capability of the ADF?

AUKUS undoubtedly presents the ADF with opportunity costs. The financial resources devoted to AUKUS are not available to other, more strictly defensive, capabilities.

Are there cost-effective and achievable alternatives to AUKUS that better enhance Australia’s peace and security?

A few can be mentioned:-

- Improved roads.
- Improved railways.
- More hospitals.
- More housing.
- Better care for the aged and disabled.
- Better public education.
- A trained body of people dedicated to disaster relief (as the climate crisis deepens).
- Preparation for accommodating large numbers of ‘climate refugees’.
- More active diplomacy.
- More aid for poor nations.
- Greater concentration of truly defensive military capabilities

What are the implications of AUKUS for regional peace and security, including Australia's relations with China, ASEAN, and the Pacific Islands nations, including commitments under the Treaty of Rarotonga (South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty)?

AUKUS sends the message that Australia is preparing for war. It therefore does nothing to contribute to regional peace or stability. It has already worsened relations with China and ASEAN and Pacific nations, who must see it for what it is - a most aggressive development.

AUKUS calls into question Australia's true commitment to the Treaty of Rarotonga, so has severely damaged trust between this nation and its Pacific neighbours.

Globally, there are no nations with nuclear submarines that are not also armed with nuclear weapons. AUKUS makes Australia an exception, so creates an uneasy feeling that Australia's commitment to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is less than whole-hearted.

(That Australia does not question the USA's 'neither confirm nor deny' stance, when potentially nuclear-armed planes and submarines may make use of facilities on Australian soil, only adds to this concern.)