

24th November 2021

Submission to the Inquiry into the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement (ENNPIA)

This agreement is a significant document underpinning the new AUKUS partnership with the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK), including the sharing of nuclear technology for a new fleet of nuclear submarines. The agreement outlines some of the terms of the sharing of technology, ensuring that sensitive information relating to nuclear technology is kept confidential. The agreement has entered public focus with the discussion around Australia's submarine acquisition and the impact on foreign policy and defence policy. The agreement has great significance diplomatically and strategically with the enhanced cooperation with US and UK and Australia gaining access to advanced nuclear technology and submarine capabilities.

With the agreement, Australia has decided to end the acquisition of submarines from the French and instead turn to the US and UK. Critically, the new fleet of eight submarines will be nuclear powered, rather than conventionally powered, which radically upgrades their capabilities (along with the challenges of maintaining a submarine fleet).¹ This will make Australia the 7th nuclear submarine country - along with United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and India.²

It is a big step for Australia to be shared nuclear technology from the United States, which indicates both the trust placed in Australia and strength of the relationship - along with the threat in the region, namely an increasingly belligerent China under President Xi Jinping.³

Diplomatically, our submarine policy has not been handled as sensitively as it could have been. As Nicholson notes, Australia's search for new submarines has over time "badly upset the Swedes, the Germans, the Japanese and now the French."⁴

However, from a defence perspective - there are merits to the new partnership. Nuclear submarines radically enhance our maritime security capabilities. With Australia having the 3rd largest exclusive economic zone, we have large amounts of maritime territory to traverse. The regions in which we might engage e.g. the South China Sea also have long transit routes. Nuclear submarines have greater speed and endurance - enabling them to reach their destination quicker and stay there longer. Nuclear submarines have "superior characteristics of stealth, speed,

¹ Nicholson 2021.

² Erickson 2021.

³ Erickson 2021; Nicholson 2021.

⁴ Nicholson 2021.

manoeuvrability, survivability and endurance.”⁵ This enables “longer patrols, greater endurance in disputed waters and more risk for the likeliest enemy.”⁶ One of the key benefits of submarine is their stealth - which enables them to potentially be anywhere. As Axe notes, “As they gaze out across the disputed waters of the China Seas, Chinese military planners must ask themselves—is there an Australian submarine lurking nearby?”⁷ With nuclear subs, the answer is nearly always a potential yes.

A key question is the number of submarines that we have - particularly with the time taken up by transit, repairs or resupply. According to Hugh White, Australia should be focused on protecting our shipping lanes close to Australia. For the price of the 8 nuclear submarines, we could get 24 conventional submarines.⁸ Since the 2009 Defence White Paper, the ideal number of submarines has been 12.⁹ Australia’s deal with the French was to receive twelve Barracuda-based Attack-class submarines.¹⁰ The new fleet of some eight nuclear submarines will be fewer (albeit still greater than our six Collins Class submarines).¹¹ However, the greater speed and endurance of nuclear submarines (limited only by the crew’s needs) enables a greater number of patrol days compared to conventional submarines - even with a fewer number.¹² In this case, quality of submarines can make up for quantity and enable Australia to better secure our maritime interests.

There are complex issues and questions that need to be considered - including whether we will commission submarines from the US or the UK, how we gain the technical and manpower capability to maintain nuclear submarines, and what we will do in the interim period. Diplomatically, we need to consider how to repair our relationship with the French, what this saga has done to our reputation with other nations, and addressing any concerns other nations may have from our nuclear capability (including our near neighbours such as Indonesia and Malaysia). There could have been ways for the process to be better handled by the government, but there are benefits from the AUKUS partnership - and this agreement is a good step along the way to implementing that partnership.

Thank you for considering my submission.

Benjamin Cronshaw.

⁵ Tillett 2021.; Erickson 2021.; Chang 2021.

⁶ Axe 2021.

⁷ Axe 2021.

⁸ Tillett 2021.

⁹ Tillett 2021; Hellyer 2020.

¹⁰ Erickson 2021.

¹¹ Erickson 2021.

¹² Axe 2021; Helleyer 2020.

Bibliography

Brendan Nicholson, October 2021, "'Australia's sharpest minds' needed to pull off nuclear submarine plan." The Strategist.

<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australias-sharpest-minds-needed-to-pull-off-nuclear-submarine-plan/>

Andrew Erickson, September 2021, "Australia Badly Needs Nuclear Submarines." Foreign Policy.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/20/australia-aukus-nuclear-submarines-china/>

Andrew Tillett. September 2021. "Nuclear family: Setting a new course in submarine policy." Foreign Policy.

<https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/nuclear-family-setting-a-new-course-in-submarine-policy-20210916-p58s9t>

Felix Chang. October 2021. "Strategic Choice: Australia's Nuclear-Powered Submarines." Foreign Policy Research Institute.

<https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/10/strategic-choice-australias-nuclear-powered-submarines/>

Andrew Davies. November 2018. "The aggregate failure of Australia's submarine policy." The Strategist.

<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-aggregate-failure-of-australias-submarine-policy/>

David Axe. September 2021. "Australia Needs Nuke Subs To Solve One Big Problem - 3,500 Miles Of Open Ocean." Forbes.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2021/09/20/australia-needs-nuke-subs-to-solve-one-big-problem-3500-miles-of-open-ocean/?sh=21338f86560d>

Marcus Hellyer. November 2020. "Why does Australia need 12 submarines?" The Strategist.

<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/why-does-australia-need-12-submarines/>

Janis Cocking et al. 2016. "Australia's requirement for submarines." Department of Defence.

<https://www.dst.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/documents/DSC%201618%20-%20DST%20Submarine%20Report%20PRO4%20LR.pdf>