

From the submarine to the ridiculous

by **Hugh White**

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The old plan was to build a conventionally powered version of a nuclear-powered French submarine. It was crazy. The new plan – to buy a nuclear-powered submarine instead – is worse. It will make the replacement of the Royal Australian Navy's fleet of Collins-class boats riskier, costlier and slower. It means an even bigger slump in our submarine capability over the next few dangerous decades. And it deepens our commitment to the United States' military confrontation of China, which has little chance of success and carries terrifying risks.

There is a reason why only six countries, all of them nuclear-armed, operate nuclear-powered subs. For everyone else their advantages, especially higher range and speed, do not outweigh their much greater costs. Nuclear propulsion makes perfect sense for nuclear-armed ballistic missile subs, and for the "hunter-killer" subs that are designed to track and destroy them. But for other tasks, especially for operating against enemy shipping, conventionally powered diesel-electric subs are more cost-effective.

If Australia's submarines were intended primarily to defend Australia and our closer neighbours, then there is no way we'd consider nuclear propulsion. But the navy decided many years ago that the primary role for our new boats should be to operate off the coast of China in co-operation with the US Navy, and the government has eagerly gone along. That required a submarine that was bigger and more complex than any conventional sub in the world, with attributes only found in nuclear-powered boats. It was the attempt to satisfy these demands that led us to the highly problematic French deal, which has now imploded so spectacularly.

Under the new AUKUS arrangement, announced on Thursday, Australia will get access to highly sensitive nuclear propulsion technology that will allow us to go nuclear ourselves. The plan is to build eight boats in South Australia, based either on the American Virginia-class or the British Astute-class designs. Scott

Morrison said the decision will be made after an 18-month process to explore and assess all the issues and options involved.

In some ways switching to nuclear power makes a kind of sense – but only if we really need the highly ambitious capabilities that have driven us to this step, and are now driving us further and further into bigger and more complex boats. You can see this by looking simply at the size of the submarines we are talking about. The Collins class are 3000 tonnes. The now-abandoned French-designed Attack class were going to be 4500 tonnes. The American and British that we are now looking at are more than 7000 tonnes.

That is a lot of boat, and they are very capable. But those capabilities carry immense penalties. Start with cost. The prime minister has acknowledged that the new plan will cost even more than the old one, and the numbers will be cut from 12 to eight. At an estimated \$80 billion for 12 boats, the French program was already staggeringly expensive. International comparisons make it clear we could build large, modern, conventionally powered subs for half that price. We could have twice as many submarines in service for the same amount of money if we scrapped the French but stayed with conventional power and didn't go nuclear. Now we will have only eight boats. That's a big operational loss, because numbers really count in battle.

Then there is timing. The PM has acknowledged that we will now not see the first of the new nuclear-powered submarines in service before 2040. Even if all goes well, that means we will not have replaced the six Collins-class boats until after 2050, and will not have 12 boats in service until the mid-2060s. That is just way too slow when our strategic circumstances are changing so fast. We need a much bigger submarine capacity, much sooner.

And that timetable may well slip, too. All subs are complex, but nuclear subs are doubly so, and Australia has no expertise at all in this form of propulsion, and very little expertise in nuclear engineering to build on. No decision has been made on what design we will buy – on whether we will buy an existing British or American design “off-the-shelf” or develop a modified design of our own. Even an off-the-shelf design would be risky, and any modifications would make it far more so. Then the challenge of building these boats in Australia, as the government remains committed to do, is daunting. Long delays are very likely, so we must prudently expect to wait to the mid 2040s for the new subs to enter service.

Until then the government is relying on the old Collins-class boats to fill the gap. They plan a major upgrade to extend the Collins' operational life, but that project also is complex and risky, and it is only now getting under way. There is no way to avoid a serious drop in capability in the 2030s, and a real risk that fumbles in the Collins upgrade and delays in the new nuclear boats will see our submarine force disappear for a while.

Then there is the challenge of operating and maintaining nuclear-powered submarines safely. This is an immensely complex and demanding responsibility, and would impose huge responsibilities on the navy, which has struggled in recent years to operate much simpler systems. No doubt the government and the navy intend to rely heavily on Britain and the US to help, but therein lies a problem. Apart from cost and delay, opting for nuclear subs deepens our dependence on the US and Britain, and that carries real strategic risks in the tense and fast-changing power politics of our region. So much for the government's much-touted sovereign submarine capability.

It is a big step for the US to agree to share, and to allow Britain to share, its nuclear-propulsion technology with Australia. They have never done that before with anyone else. Their reason has nothing to do with the boilerplate talk of shared values and mutual commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. It has everything to do with the US's hard-nosed strategic interest to tie us in more closely to its military strategy against China.

Washington wants Australia to be able to do more – much more – to support them in a war with China. It is therefore in America's interest to see us invest in forces designed for that, and nuclear-powered submarines fit their needs perfectly. The government would argue this is in our interests, too, because we must depend on the US to resist China's threatening ambitions, so we should do all we can to help them.

But putting all our eggs in America's basket is only a good strategy if the US is sure to win the contest with China over which of them will dominate Asia in the decades ahead, and if its interests in the region will always align with ours. That is far from assured. Scott Morrison may refer to our alliance as the "forever relationship", but nothing is forever in power politics. The US faces an immense challenge in confronting and containing China in its own backyard. It is the most formidable rival the country has ever faced, and it will demand huge sacrifices to defeat.

We have seen tough talk out of Washington now for a decade about its determination to take China on. But so far we have seen no sign that US voters or their leaders are really willing to bear the burdens and pay the costs involved. On the contrary, both Joe Biden and Donald Trump, in their different ways, have made it clear that when push comes to shove they have little appetite for the obligations of global leadership. We in Australia simply cannot plan our future on the assumption that the US will always be there for us, no matter how many nuclear subs we buy.

And if the US, by miscalculation, does find itself at war with China, we absolutely cannot assume that it would win. That must, surely, enter our calculations about whether we commit ourselves to fighting alongside America. And yet that is what we are increasingly doing.

What should we do instead? First, we should recognise, as our neighbours in South-East Asia do, that confronting and containing China won't work. Whether we like it or not, we are going to have to live with China's power and growing influence. That doesn't mean doing whatever China says, but it does mean stepping back from Washington's policy of trying to push back China by threatening war.

Second, we should be building forces to defend ourselves without relying on the US, rather than deepening our dependency in an ally that, for all its tough talk, is becoming less and less credible. That means buying submarines and other systems that work cost-effectively to defend ourselves, not serve our allies – which means buying conventional rather than nuclear submarines.

And third, we should step back and think about our long-term future as a country. Thirty years ago Bob Hawke and Paul Keating said Australia had no choice but to stop looking for our security from Asia and start looking for it in Asia. That remains true, and it is the very opposite of turning back the clock to the days of Robert Menzies and his two Anglo-Saxon "great and powerful friends".

But that is exactly what Morrison has done this week. He has tied Australia to a deal that undermines our sovereign capabilities, overspends on hardware we can barely be confident of operating, and drags us closer to the front line of a war we may have no interest in fighting.

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