

News from under the Southern Cross - Edition 35

AUKUS

23 September

The 16th of September was an historic day for Australia. The formation of a new security partnership among the three nations of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS) was announced, and as a first step, Australia, with assistance from both the UK and US, would proceed with the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines.



The Collins-class submarine, 6 of which are operated by the RAN
(Source: Australian Department of Defence)

1. An evening that shook Canberra

Speculation was running rampant in Canberra on the 15th of September, given that none of the details of the important announcement that was to be delivered by Prime Minister Morrison the following day had yet been revealed. A variety of observations were being tossed about between journalists, such as “Is the lease of the Port of Darwin to Landbridge being re-considered?”, and “Is the trouble-plagued future submarine contract with Naval Group about to be torn up?”

Furthermore, late in the evening of the 15th, once it had been reported that Australia was not only going to tear up its contract with Naval Group, but a bold shift would be made to acquire not conventionally-

powered but nuclear-powered submarines, the Australian government (as a whole), mass media, and the diplomatic corps were all left utterly astonished.

2. Perfect information control

This turnabout in policy was subject to water-tight controls and was carried out by only a small group of government officials, so much so that a former senior government official remarked that “in Canberra, major political initiatives tend to be leaked to the press halfway through (their creation). It’s rare to see such exemplary information control”.

According to the local press, negotiations and discussions had been taking place in great secrecy for more than a year. This allowed sufficient time to prepare for the change in policy and then the announcement.



The public announcement by the leaders of Australia, the UK and the US
(Source: Twitter@ScottMorrisonMP 16 September 2021)

3. Not “USUKA”, but “AUKUS”

In Japan, there’s been a tendency to refer to this new partnership as “US-UK-A”, but it should be referred to as “A-UK-US”. That’s because in the original English it is ‘AUKUS’. It takes the first letters from Australia, United Kingdom, United States, and lines them up in the order of “A-UK-US”.

This is not simply because it has a nice ring, but it also expresses the true state of affairs. In short, it focuses on the fact that in order for Australia to develop its future submarines, the UK and US responded to a call from Australia for technical assistance so Australia could acquire nuclear submarines.

4. A long-running idea

In the background to the development of Australia's future submarine lies France's securing contract in 2016 over offers by Japan and Germany. Even at that time, I occasionally heard Aussies concerned informally say "nuclear-powered submarines are the most preferable option for us if possible". The reason for this lies in the fact that for the RAN, which must cover extensive territorial seas as the Navy of an enormous island continent, the superior speed, power, and underwater endurance of nuclear-powered submarines is desirable from a capability point of view.



The third of the Soryu-class submarines "Hakuryu", entering Sydney Harbour to participate in the Joint Japan-Australia Exercise "Nichigo Trident" (2016) (Source: Australian Department of Defence)

5. Restrictions and Changes

On the other hand, as we can see from the fact that Australia hasn't yet adopted a nuclear power plant, a certain section of Australian society has a strong aversion to nuclear power. Furthermore, the adoption of nuclear-powered submarines comes with many additional costs. And you also need the agreement and support of states that already have nuclear-powered submarines to transfer that technology. It was because of restrictions such as these that Australia's previous policy settled for adopting a conventionally-powered submarine as Plan B.

However, subsequent implementation of the submarine contract with France ran into difficulties. It was reported that costs were greatly exceeding the original budget estimate, there were major delays to schedules, and manufacturing in the city of Adelaide in South Australia, which Australia saw as a key, was

not moving forward as much as expected. In the midst of this situation, voices calling for a re-think of the contract grew ever louder.

In addition, as the strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific continued to grow severer year after year, consideration was given to improving defence capabilities.

6. The implications for Japan

The strengthening of defence and security co-operation between Australia, the UK and the US in this manner will improve deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region, which is important for the peace and security of the region. Japan has been building on its co-operation with Australia in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and the Sea of Japan. Japan therefore welcomes improvements in the capabilities of the RAN, for this will further expand the range of co-operation that it can undertake with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF).



The RAN frigate “HMAS Parramatta” participating in ANNUALEX with the JMSDF (2019) (Source: JMSDF)

In addition, although Australia is already spending over 2 per cent of its GDP on defence, the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines will require further budgetary measures. The determination and resolve to strengthen defence capability in response to the deteriorating strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific provides considerable food for thought for many in Japan.

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