

The AUKUS Cash Cow: Robbing the Australian Taxpayer

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*Two British ministers, the UK **Foreign Secretary David Cameron** and **Defence Secretary Grant Shapps**, paid a recent visit to Australia recently as part of the AUKMIN (Australia-United Kingdom Ministerial Consultations) talks. It showed, yet again, that Australia's government loves being mugged. Stomped on. Mowed over. Beaten.*

It was mugged, from the outset, in its unconditional surrender to the US military industrial complex with the AUKUS security agreement. It was mugged in throwing money (that of the Australian taxpayer) at the US submarine industry, which is lagging in its production schedule for both the Virginia-class boats and new designs such as the Columbia class. British shipyards were hardly going to miss out on this generous distribution of Australian money, largesse ill-deserved for a flagging production line.

A joint [statement](#) on the March 22 meeting, conducted with **Defence Minister Richard Marles** and **Foreign Minister Penny Wong**, was packed with trite observations and lazy reflections about the nature of the "international order". Ministers "agreed the contemporary [UK-Australian] relationship is responding in an agile and coordinated way to global challenges." When it comes to matters of submarine finance and construction, agility is that last word that comes to mind.

Boxes were ticked with managerial, inconsequential rigour. Russia, condemned for its "full-scale, illegal and immoral invasion of Ukraine". Encouragement offered for Australia in training Ukrainian personnel through Operation Kudu and joining the Drone Capability Coalition. Exaggerated "concern at the catastrophic humanitarian crisis in Gaza." Praise for the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and "respect of navigation."

The relevant pointers were to be found later in the statement. The UK has been hoping for a greater engagement in the Indo-Pacific (those damn French take all the plaudits from the European power perspective), and the AUKUS bridge has been one excuse for doing so. Accordingly, this signalled a “commitment to a comprehensive and modern defence relationship, underlined by the signing of the updated *Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland for Defence and Security Cooperation*.”

When politicians need to justify opening the public wallet, such tired terms as “unprecedented”, “threat” and “changing” are used. These [are the words](#) of foreign minister Wong: “Australia and the United Kingdom are building on our longstanding strategic partnership to address our challenging and rapidly changing world”. Marles preferred the words “an increasingly complex strategic environment”. Shapps [followed a similar](#) line of thinking. “Nuclear-powered submarines are not cheap, but we live in a much more dangerous world, where we are seeing a much more assertive region [with] China, a much more dangerous world all around with what is happening in the Middle East and Europe.” Hardly a basis for the submarines, but the fetish is strong and gripping.

With dread, critics of AUKUS would have noted yet another round of promised disgorging. Britain’s submarine industry is even more lagging than that of the United States, and bringing Britannia aboard the subsidy truck is yet another signal that the AUKUS submarines, when and if they ever get off the design page and groan off the shipyards, are guaranteed well deserved obsolescence or glorious unworkability.

A [separate statement released](#) by all the partners of the AUKUS agreement glories in the SSN-AUKUS submarine, intended as a joint effort between BAE Systems and the Australian Submarine Corporation (ASC). (BAE Systems, it should be remembered, is behind the [troubled](#) Hunter-class frigate program, one plagued by difficulties in unproven capabilities.)

An already challenging series of ingredients is further complicated by the US role as well. “SSN-AUKUS is being trilaterally developed, based on the United Kingdom’s next designs and incorporation technology from all three nations, including cutting edge United States submarine technologies.” This fabled fiction “will be equipped for intelligence, surveillance, undersea warfare and strike missions, and will provide maximum interoperability among AUKUS partners.” The ink on this is clear: the Royal Australian Navy will, as with any of the promised second-hand Virginia-class boats, be a subordinate partner.

In this, a false sense of submarine construction is being conveyed through what is termed the “Optimal Pathway”, ostensibly to “create a stronger, more resilient trilateral submarine industrial base, supporting submarine production and maintenance in all three countries.” In actual fact, the Australian leg of this entire effort is considerably greater in supporting the two partners, be it in terms of upgrading HMAS Stirling in Western Australia to permit UK and US SSNs to dock as part of Submarine Rotational Force West from 2027, and infrastructure upgrades in South Australia. It all has the appearance of garrisoning by foreign powers, a reality all the more startling given various upgrades to land and aerial platforms for the United States in the Northern Territory.

The eye-opener in the AUKMIN chatter [is the promise](#) from Canberra to send A\$4.6 billion (£2.4 billion) to speed up lethargic construction at the Rolls-Royce nuclear reactor production line. There are already questions that the reactor cores, being built at Derby, will be delayed for the UK’s own Dreadnought nuclear submarine. The amount, it was stated

by the Australian government, was deemed “an appropriate and proportionate contribution to expand production and accommodate Australia’s requirements”. Hardly.

Ultimately, this absurd spectacle entails a windfall of cash, ill-deserved funding to two powers with little promise of returns and no guarantees of speedier boat construction. The shipyards of both the UK and the United States can take much joy from this, as can those keen to further proliferate nuclear platforms, leaving the Australian voter with that terrible feeling of being, well, mugged.

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