

Congressional Concerns: Stalling Nuclear Submarines for Australia

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Asia-Pacific Research, July 24, 2023

Region: [Oceania, USA](#)

Theme: [Defence](#)

All Global Research articles can be read in 51 languages by activating the Translate Website button below the author's name.

To receive Global Research's Daily Newsletter (selected articles), [click here](#).

Click the share button above to email/forward this article to your friends and colleagues. Follow us on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) and subscribe to our [Telegram Channel](#). Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

Any security arrangement with too many variables and multiple contingencies, risks stuttering and keeling over. Critical delays might be suffered, attributable to a number of factors beyond the parties concerned. Disputes and disagreements may surface. Such an arrangement is AUKUS, where the number of cooks risk spoiling any meal they promise to cook.

The main dish here comprises the nuclear-powered submarines that are meant to make their way to Australian shores, both in terms of purchase and construction. It marks what the US, UK and Australia describe as the first pillar of the agreement. Ostensibly, they are intended for the island continent's self-defence, declared as wholesomely and even desperately necessary in these dangerous times. Factually, they are intended as expensive toys for willing vassals, possibly operated by Australian personnel, at the beckon call of US naval and military forces, monitoring Chinese forces and any mischief they might cause.

While the agreement envisages the creation of specific AUKUS submarines using a British design, supplemented by US technology and Australian logistics, up to three Virginia Class (SSN-774) submarines are intended as an initial transfer. The decision to do so, however, ultimately resides in Congress. As delighted and willing as **President Joe Biden** might well be to part with such hulks, representatives in Washington are not all in accord.

Signs that not all lawmakers were keen on the arrangement were already being expressed in December 2022. In [a letter](#) to Biden authored by Democratic **Senator Jack Reed** and outgoing Republican **Senator James Inhofe**, concerns were expressed "about the state of the US submarine industrial base as well as its ability to support the desired AUKUS SSN [nuclear sub] end state." Current conditions, the senators went on to describe, required "a sober assessment of the facts to avoid stressing the US submarine industrial base to the breaking point."

On May 22, a Congressional Research Service [report](#) outlined some of the issues facing US politicians regarding the procurement of the Virginia (SSN-774) submarine for the Australian Navy. Should, for instance, Congress “approve, reject, or modify DOD’s AUKUS-related legislative package for the FY2024 NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act] sent to Congress on May 2, 2023”? Would the transfer of three to five such boats “while pursuing the construction of three to five replacement SSNs for the US Navy” have a “net impact on collective allied deterrence”? And should Beijing even worry, given some unequivocal remarks from Australian officials that they would not automatically use the US-supplied boats against them in a conflict involving Washington.

The report has proven prescient enough. Republicans on the Senate Armed Services Committee have realised that stalling aspects of AUKUS might prove useful, if it entails increasing military spending beyond levels set by the current debt-limit deal. On July 16, Mississippi **Senator Roger Wicker**, one of the committee’s ranking members, took to the *Wall Street Journal* [to declare](#) that the US had to double submarine production. The opening words of praise for the security pact are merely the prelude for a giant dollop of America First advice, snootily relegating Australia to the status of mere clients. “As it stands, the AUKUS plan would transfer US Virginia-class submarines to a partner nation even before we have met our own Navy’s requirements.”

The magic number of 66 nuclear submarines was some way off; the US only had 49 in its fleet, a number that would fall to three by 2030 as aging submarines retired at a rate faster than their replacement. The industrial base for such vessels had been stretched, with a mere 1.2 Virginia-class attack submarines being produced annually instead of the necessary two. For Wicker, the halcyon days for submarine procurement were the 1980s, when bold, muscular administrations lustily spent money on the program.

Then came another problem: almost 40% of the US attack submarines would be incapable of deployment due to maintenance delays. The senator offered one example from 2021: an accident to the *USS Connecticut* in the South China Sea meant that it would not be of use until 2026.

The terms, for Wicker, are stark. “To keep the commitment under AUKUS, and not reduce our own fleet, the US would have to produce between 2.3 and 2.5 attack submarines a year.” There would have to be improvements in the field of submarine maintenance and “more forward basing of submarines” (Australia is not mentioned as an option for such staging, but the implication throbs in its obviousness). While acknowledging that Australian investment in US shipyards will help, the amount of \$3 billion in the submarine base, Wicker [stated in a separate interview](#) fell far short of what was necessary.

Priorities are what they are: “we cannot afford to shrink the overworked US submarine fleet at a dangerous moment.” And why should that be so? Because the People’s Liberation Army of China will, as instructed by China’s **President Xi Jinping**, “be ready for a Taiwan invasion by 2027. Time is of the essence.”

When, then, to be done? No fuss will be made by the senator and his colleagues were Biden to “immediately send Congress a request for supplemental appropriations and authorities – including a detailed implementation – that increases US submarine production to 2.5 Virginia-class attack submarines.” General investments in US submarine production capacity including supplier and workforce development initiatives were needed. Remember, Wicker urges, those bold and brash expenditures of the Second World War and the Cold War. “To

fulfill the promise and benefit of the AUKUS agreement, we need such clarity of purpose once again.”

Such manoeuvring has caught the Democrats off guard. Senate Foreign Relations Chair **Bob Menendez** (D-NJ), who had hoped for an easy transfer of submarines pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act, [is pondering the need](#) for a separate amendment to the defence policy bill facilitating the submarine transfer. He thought that Republican reluctance to permit the transfer to the Australians was “foolish because giving us the ability to have that type of presence in the Pacific with a strong ally makes a lot of sense”.

As US lawmakers wrestle over funds and the need to increase submarine production, the Australian side of the bargain looks flimsy, weak, and dispensable. With cap waiting to be filled, Canberra’s undistinguished begging is qualified by what, exactly, will be provided. What the US president promises, Congress taketh. Wise heads might see this as a chance to disentangle, extricate, and cancel an agreement monumentally absurd, costly and filled with folly. It might even go some way to preserve peace rather than stimulate Indo-Pacific militarism.

*

Note to readers: Please click the share button above. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter and subscribe to our Telegram Channel. Feel free to repost and share widely Global Research articles.

***Dr. Binoy Kampmark** was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a regular contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com*

The original source of this article is Asia-Pacific Research
Copyright © [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#), Asia-Pacific Research, 2023

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). Asia-Pacific Research will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. Asia-Pacific Research grants permission to cross-post Asia-Pacific Research articles on community internet sites as long as the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Asia-Pacific Research article. For publication of Asia-Pacific Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: editors@asia-pacificresearch.com

www.asia-pacificresearch.com contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: editors@asia-pacificresearch.com

