



## The Australian Submarine Decision 2021



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# Moving from Conventional to Nuclear Attack Submarines

September 19, 2021

The recent announcement of the decision by the Australian government to cancel their diesel submarine contract and to acquire nuclear attack submarines is a significant one. There is much already written about the announcement and its consequences, but what can get lost in the noise is really the key point: this decision launches the next phase of Australian strategic development, but down a path which has been evolving for some time.

At the heart of the reason the Aussies have done so is clearly the Chinese behavior and virtual war with Australia. Australia as a continent is a key challenge for Chinese ambitions in the region. They are a continent which can stage long-range forces against Chinese military operations. The Chinese Communist leaders have done what they should not have: Awakening the quiet power in the Pacific to shaping a longer-range defense force, closely allied with the major competitors of China.

Only Australia really counts in terms of deterring China in a fundamental geographical way: they are a firmly liberal democratic country which rejects Chinese Communism. And as such, the Chinese economic and political engagements in Australia, coupled with the political and cyber warfare that the Chinese have engaged in with the clear desire to destabilize Australia has been met with firm resolve. And the Chinese have responded by escalation up to an including direct military threats against Australia.

This is the driver of the decision. Full stop. It is not about not loving the French, and an inability to work with France or ignoring their contractual obligations under the contracts signed earlier. When Australia made the decision to go with the French Naval Group and build a long ranger diesel submarine, the strategic context was very different than it is today. I will deal with the French and other issues in my next article, but here I am focusing on the core issue which is the strategic context in which Australia sought to acquire nuclear attack submarines.

When the premise of your decision changes, it is important to recognize that and to re-calibrate, re-load and rethink what you are doing and why. For the Australian government, the expensive effort to build a new class of diesel submarines was a key part of dealing with the regional dynamics changing in their region. But in only five years, the Xi government has pursued a course which is changing the course of Pacific defense by the liberal democracies and their allies.

I am writing this article while in my digs in Paris, France. But I have spent the last few days talking with a number of my Australian and French colleagues. This is a strategic event which in the words of one Australian colleague: “This is the most significant defense acquisition in my lifetime by the Australian government.”

But it also is a launch point for the next phase of Australian strategic development which is itself part of a trajectory which was launched earlier. During my visits to Australia since 2014, I had a chance to work with the Williams Foundation and then became a Fellow with the Foundation. I have published a book which lays out what I learned during my visits in terms of shaping a narrative built around the

seminars held twice a year by the Foundation. Those seminars and my book provide a very clear record of how the ADF has rethought its place in the world and how to operate more effectively.

The F-35 acquisition decision at the beginning of my visits was more than a platform choice; it was the next step in RAAF modernization but one which reached out to the joint force and has driven the ADF voyage on building a fifth-generation force. Now the nuclear submarine decision is the keystone to the next phase of this journey, one which is about extending the reach of the ADF throughout the entire Indo-Pacific region.

The precursor for this decision lies not in submarines but a growing concern with the need for the ADF to have longer-range strike capability. In 2018, one of our seminars dealt directly with the long-range strike requirement. In the terms of reference for the seminar held on August 22, 2018 this key point was made: “The ability to strike at range brings a new dimension into any unfolding strategic scenario which, in itself, may often deter escalation into armed conflict. While in the event of escalation occurring, the absence of a long-range strike capability both limits Australia’s options for strategic maneuver and concedes to an adversary the ability to dictate the terms of engagement.

“An independent strike capability expands the range of options to achieve Australia’s strategic ends; signals a serious intent and commitment about Australia’s national security; and has the capacity to influence strategic outcomes short of resorting to armed conflict.”

The Morrison government announced its defense strategy in July 2020 and that announcement is where I started my book and then looked backwards. I labelled that strategy as a strategic reset. And that reset began with weapons not platforms. On March 31, 2021, the Prime Minister announced a new effort in the weapons area.

“The Morrison Government will accelerate the creation of a \$1 billion Sovereign Guided Weapons Enterprise, boosting skilled jobs and helping secure Australia’s sovereign defence capabilities. The Department of Defence will now select a strategic industry partner to operate a sovereign guided weapons manufacturing capability on behalf of the Government as a key part of the new Enterprise. The new Enterprise will support missile and guided weapons manufacturing for use across the Australian Defence Force.”

In doing so, the Australian government opened up discussions with the Trump Administration with regard to acquiring not only weapons but an ability to produce those weapons on Australian soil. A key element of this discussion revolved around naval weapons. Which also highlights a key aspect of how the ADF has worked with the United States military over the past few years. The ADF has a close working relationship with the U.S. Navy and the USMC. In fact, the RAAF has bought and operated a number of naval air platforms over the years in addition to the close working relationship with the U.S. Navy in operations and training. And is currently operating a number of key systems which will interact nicely with the new submarine, notably Triton and the P-8.

In the course of these discussions the aperture opened on the possibility of the acquisition of a platform which could carry some of these weapons deep into the Pacific, namely, the nuclear submarine. Because the nuclear navy is in many ways the crown jewel of the U.S. military, the ADF leadership has full confidence in them as partners. For the U.S. Navy, having worked for a long period with the British Navy, and in the case of the Astute class having engaged through its contractors in direct support for the UK at home in building the new nuclear attack submarine, a template was available which could be applied to the Australian case.

The re-set of Australian defence is wide-ranging and includes re-working Australia defense ecosystems for greater resilience, logistical depth, and shifts in geographical focus, namely towards Western Australia and the Northern territories. Having visited Western Australia in 2020 just prior to the pandemic shut down of Australia it is clear that a buildup of infrastructure in this area up to and including the Northern Territories is a core aspect of any strategic reset.

And the logical next step for the RAAF to join in this journey would be to acquire a long-range bomber. But the journey begins with the new submarine.

## **The Australian Submarine Decision and Shaping a Way Ahead for the ADF**

September 24, 2021

The decision to build a fleet of nuclear attack submarines is clearly a not a simple platform decision. And its impact is not limited to the Royal Australian Navy or to the allies who are part of the agreement to shape such a force.

The ADF has been on a journey for joint force development for some time. Notably, the acquisition of the F-35 clearly drove consideration for how to shape a fifth-generation force. Now it is about a long-range fifth generation force.

It must be remembered that when the diesel submarine decision was taken, Japanese were the presumptive favorites. At least until the decision was announced. There was much disappointment and concern in Tokyo about the shift to buying a French to be designed submarine. Yet today, the Japanese-Australian relationship is stronger than ever in the defense domain. In part, it is so because of the same factor that reshaped Australian thinking about the submarine, namely, Chinese Communist behavior and military developments.

It also needs to be remembered that the Australians were NOT buying an off the shelf French submarine. On the one hand, they were drawing upon the Virginia-class combat system and had contracted Lockheed Martin as the prime contractor for the new build diesel submarine. On the other hand, the new build submarine was never the “deal of the century” as proclaimed by the French government. It was a series of contracts which could eventually lead to the build of a new design submarine. In effect, the program was shaped to work design, and then make the build decision. In effect, Naval Group had been hired as a design consultant with the expected decision to build that submarine in Australia as Naval Group and the Commonwealth resolved the manufacturing build challenges.

It also needs to be remembered how the Royal Australian Navy and the Commonwealth had shaped their new shipbuilding program. It was about taking a two-prong approach. First, there is a focus on the combat systems and integratability across the fleet. Second, there is a focus on the platform build itself. With the decision to move to a nuclear submarine, the combat system trajectory already in place for the new build diesel submarine can clearly be leveraged going forward.

When I was last in Australia, in March 2020 before the pandemic impact, I worked on a report on the first new build Australian ship, namely, the Offshore Patrol Vessel. After my discussions with the Capability Acquisition and Sustainment Group or CASG in Canberra, this is what I concluded about the new approach:

“Clearly the Department is focusing on a new approach in launching this ship, but a new approach which is seen to provide a template for the way ahead. It is not about simply having a one-off platform innovation process; it is about launching a new way of building this ship and in so doing setting in motion new ways to manage the initial build and the ongoing modernization process.

“It is not about having a bespoke platform; it is about shaping an approach that allows leveraging the systems onboard the new platform across the entire fleet and Australian Defence Force modernization process.

“In part, it is selecting a platform which physically can allow for the upgrade process envisaged with the new emphasis on a fleet mission systems management model. The Royal Australian Navy has clearly gone through a process of choosing a ship that has a lot of space, a lot of margins, the ability to adapt to missions by its space on deck, and under the deck for a modular or containerized solutions, extra power to operate for what comes in the future, and the ability to adapt the platform through further evolution of the design to take on different missions into the future. The platform is important; but the focus is not on what the systems specific to the ship allow it to operate organically as an end in of itself but as part of wider operational integratable force.”

<https://sldinfo.com/2020/03/the-australian-government-and-the-australian-arafura-class-offshore-patrol-vessel-the-perspective-of-the-royal-australian-navy-ran-and-capability-acquisition-and-sustainment-group-casg/>

What this means in blunt terms is that the platform has changed but the focus on an integratable combat system has not. The first was the focus with Naval Group; the second was always the focus with the Lockheed Martin team and will almost certainly continue.

The nuclear attack submarine choice is obviously a significant step in shaping new capabilities for the ADF and for the Commonwealth. But before discussing this aspect, we again need to focus on the continuity aspect. That revolves around theater anti-submarine or underwater warfare. The RAAF is adding significant capability to work the Royal Australian Navy in this domain, most notably in terms of the P-8 and Triton capabilities. The Australians do not have a separate Naval Air Force as does the United State, so RAAF and RAN integration is crucial to shaping a joint force moving ahead. What the new nuclear submarine will add is reach, range, speed and enhanced survivability, which enhances ADF capabilities over all.

The context has not changed, but the capability to be operate more effectively in that context will. This is how I assessed that context after my March 2020 visit:

There are three key elements of change shaping the operational context within which the Attack Class submarine will enter the force. The first is a significant evolution of theater anti-submarine warfare, with the coming of the P-8/Triton dyad, likely leading to further integration of the Royal Australian Air Force with the Royal Australian Navy.

The second will be the rollout of maritime remotes as part of the kill web within which ASW will evolve, with sensor networks mutating and migrating through the arrival of artificial intelligence systems working networked sensors and with sensors themselves evolving to allow for direct interactivity among the sensor themselves.

The third is migrating the skill sets and innovations generated in this decade from the continued evolution of the Collins Class submarines. During my visit to HMAS Stirling, I had a chance to discuss with submarine commander Robin Dainty.

“The demand side and the concepts of operations side of innovation affecting the naval forces will be very significant in the decade ahead. This will be a very innovative decade, one which I have characterized as building the distributed integrated force or the integrated distributed force.

“What this means for the submarine side of the house and for ASW is working new ways to cooperate both within national navies and across the air-naval-land enterprise of the allied forces. The decade will see new ways to link up distributed assets to deliver appropriate effects at the point of interest in a crisis. It will involve working new weapon and targeting solution sets; it will see an expansion of the multi-mission responsibilities for platforms working in the distributed force.

“And the Collins class will be participating in this path of innovation and lessons learned as well as technologies evolved both on the ship or the extended battlespace enabling the evolution of an integrated distributed force.”

I followed up with then Deputy Chief of the Royal Australian Navy, RADM Mark Hammond, to get his assessment about the context within which the new attack submarine was going to enter into the ADF.

“The Attack Class submarine will be a fully interoperable ADF asset optimized to survive and thrive in the contemporary and future ASW threat environment. This means deliberately designing for interoperability with our own forces, our partners and our allies. It also means integrating in the design and construction methodologies the options and margins to enable future capability enhancements.”

“In my view, our Future Force must be designed to safely and effectively operate in the ‘environment of relevance’ and fight at the ‘speed of relevance’. Neither of these reference frames are static, and both are ambiguous. But failure to consciously consider and mitigate the risks posed by either will lead to inferior capability”

It is hard to NOT see how a nuclear attack submarine meets these objectives more effectively seen from a Royal Australian Navy perspective.

<https://sldinfo.com/2020/05/the-new-build-australian-attack-submarine-putting-it-into-context/>

There are significant eco-system impacts of the nuclear submarine decision. Australia will build its basing structure to accommodate this class of ships, which means that they can host from time to time its allies who have such submarines, whether French, British or American. It also means a challenge for crewing as the Collins to Virginia is nearly three times increase in crew size.

It is about coming to terms with Western Australia and the need to build up infrastructure literally to support basing and to do so on the Eastern side of Australia as well. This will take time, money and a long-term commitment.

There is the question of time and the submarine gap which would occur if Australia is to build its own version of the Virginia or the Astute in country as the only option. But of course, it is not the only option. Back in the 2015 to 2016 period, I talked with a senior U.S. Navy official and posed the possibility of working a deal with Australia to operate the Los Angeles class submarines prior to engaging in our new build projects. I do not see why that is not an option now. And with the UK-US-Australian partnership shared crewing to get the process started is clearly an option.

The impacts of this decision reach beyond the Air Force and Navy. The impact on the Australian Army is significant. The turn towards a need for Northern Territory and Western Australian defense clearly is ramped up. The need to operate effectively from the West of Australia out to the First Island Chain becomes even more significant, and the Australian Army role is clear in this regard: a more USMC-like force is required.

In short, acquiring a nuclear attack submarine is the next step in the evolution of the ADF. And it is one about extended the reach of the ADF in the Indo-Pacific and reinforces the strategic shift under way for Australia's role in the region.

## **France, the European Union, and Allies: The Australian Submarine Decision Dynamic**

September 25, 2021

The Australian strategic decision to move from a path to build a diesel attack submarine to a nuclear one has not been a simple Australian platform decision.

It has occurred in a broader global context and has unleashed a raft of charges and counter-charges among allies, all of which are partially true, but at the end of the day takes the liberal democracies backwards and not forward to find ways to work together to protect their interests against the global authoritarians.

The volume of global comments on the Australian decision has been significant with most analyses operating as intellectual versions of taking a Rorschach psychological test for an individual. It is worse than mere finger-pointing, because commentaries operating as Rorschach tests tap deep cultural emotions.

From some French commentators we learn that this decision was a “new Trafalgar.” Given that this was an Australian decision with the UK playing a relatively minor role, this is simply wrong, unless you think Boris Johnson somehow is Lord Nelson.

From some Australian commentators, we go back to the days of French nuclear testing in the region and the disregard of Australian interests. Or we are reminded of the Greenpeace affair.



And from some British commentators we are reminded of French proclivities to pursue their own national interests at the expense of their allies.

Augmenting the intellectual discord among Australia's allies is the nature of the UK and U.S. leaders who announced the decision.

For President Biden, this was a welcome break from the impact of his Blitzkrieg withdrawal from Afghanistan on virtually all U.S. allies. One can simply look back to his treatment of the British in terms of declaring a new Atlantic Charter in June, his Sec Def signing a new carrier agreement in July, and then the pull the rug treatment in August.

And since the Administration has promised big things in dealing with China, naturally this Australian decision is sucked into the American public relations vacuum for the Administration in verifying a new strategic approach.

For Prime Minister Bo Jo (to go along with Joe), this was proof of the new launch point post-Brexit of "global Britain."

But the fundamental facts that led to the UK withdrawal from the Pacific many years ago have not changed. Britain will struggle mightily after Brexit and COVID-19 to have a credible recovery strategy.

And with the Chinese deeply embedded in the UK economy, there is little doubt that the Chinese will remind Britain of this fact in very concrete ways.

Although announced as a new tripartite agreement, I would not be carried away with this claim. It really is a defense technology agreement, which is focused on weapons, on submarines and adjacent digital technologies.

It is important, but not some kind of globally significant new alliance. Let us get real here.

And if we return to Australia itself, the role of working with the U.S. forces in the Pacific is a major one, and as the U.S. military works through ways to enhance ways to operate with enhanced survivability and force distribution, working with Australia is of growing importance.

But in all my discussions with U.S. Pacific forces, there is a very clear understanding that working with Australia is not about basing U.S. forces on a permanent basis but to use General Carlyle's formulation when he was PACAF, "it is about places, not bases."

I have little doubt that when Australia builds out its submarine bases to accommodate nuclear submarines that allies will visit and work with the Royal Australian Navy in a close and coordinated way. I would expect to see British, French and American nuclear attack submarines to become part of the ADF landscape over time. And for the Aussies as well in reverse.

But now we come to the question of France, its reactions and shaping the way ahead.

The reaction by the government is very understandable.

This is a major blow on several levels.

The first is personal as the Foreign Minister negotiated as Defense Minister the initial deal with Australia. It is personal for the Defense Minister, because she has been very active in working to solve the ongoing challenges of the Commonwealth working with French Naval Group. It is personal for President Macron because he has personally focused on raising the visibility of France in the Indo-Pacific region and working to do so for the entire European Union.

For me, recalling Ambassadors was a bit over the top right up there with the American Congress changing French Fries to Freedom Fries when the French government refused to join in the second Iraq War.

**At the end of the day, one has to figure out how to shape a way ahead.**

At bottom, this is really up to the French and the Australians.

There are many ways to do so, but if we limit ourselves to the defense realm, one path to do so would be to expand the role of European weapons manufacturers in the newly launched Australian weapons enterprise. Obviously, the core candidate for this is MBDA, the most successful UK-French defense collaboration in recent years.

A second way to do so might be to consider adding new lift capabilities to the RAAF as well, with close consideration of an A400M buy. This also has the advantage of being an airlifter that can be modified to launch missiles out of the back of the aircraft as well.

**But for the European Union there is a much deeper problem, and that is in terms of coming to terms with the Chinese engagement in Europe and the Chinese Communist agenda of using trade and investment to build out its capability to control, incentivize and disrupt European policies.**

There is a broad perception among European publics that China is in the far, far away world of the Indo-Pacific.

But this is flat out wrong.

The Chinese Communist regimes and its representatives are in Europe in force, and their commercial interests are very different from those of liberal capitalist firms.

It seems to be too forgotten by the European Union leadership in Brussels that while China was ramping up its pressure on Australia last year, the EU was working a trade deal with China. The Chinese leader made no secret of how helpful he saw this in the global competition, but frankly the EU leaders seemed not to care.

**This policy perspective was not lost on Canberra.**

The EU, the United States, Australia and all liberal democratic societies after the impacts of the pandemic clearly need to take a hard look at supply chains and manufacturing and ensure that they are secure and reliable, and not dominated by the authoritarian powers.

**After the golden age of globalization with its agnostic politics, this is hard to do.**

But then again so is having free societies. Australia is a key player in such an effort, and any thoughts on the EU side that not pursuing a trade deal with Australia after having engaged in such an effort with China would be an historic mistake of the first order.

And far more significant than working through the pain of an Australian decision with regard to its future submarine.

## **The Morrison Administration Changes Course on Attack Submarines: Some Concluding Thoughts, September 2021**

September 26, 2021

The Morrison Administration made a strategic decision to change course with regard to their procurement of new attack submarines. That decision was in line with ADF thinking with regard to the need for the force to have longer range strike capability to deal with the changing threats in the Indo-Pacific region.

**This decision has sent ripple effects into the Australian alliance structure, ripple effects which need to be worked through in the coming months.**

The first ripple effect is with regard to President XI and his Administration. Is he really the leader of life? His performance over the past three years leaves much to be desired from a Chinese national interest point of view, as well as the Chinese Communist point of view and the two are clearly not the same.

What he done is significantly worsened the Chinese situation. By unleashing the global pandemic, inadvertently or not, and doing whatever the opposite of full transparency is, he has highlighted that his regime is one of information war, not responsible global engagement.

The impacts of his regime's behavior towards the liberal democratic states over the past few years has been to work to undermine those states and their values. It has been about conducting political warfare against them. This coupled with the decisive effect which the pandemic has unleashed has significantly disrupted the kind of globalization which has benefited the growth of Chinese economic power and political influence.

In part to cover their failures, the Chinese regime engages in a very active policy of information warfare to drive wedges where possible within and among the liberal democratic states And is statesmanship is not generated in the next few months by the leaders of these liberal democracies, then the Chinese will clearly have enhanced possibilities for success in this part of their global policy.

In Australia, the recognition of political warfare against Australia has become firmly grasped. This plus the pandemic has led to a significant focus on how to build reliable and secure supply chains for the island continent.

The second ripple effect is with regard to the United Kingdom and its evolving role with Australia and the “five eyes” countries. Global Britain is a reach at best. The role of the Royal Navy is significant but generated in large part due to its relationship to the U.S. Navy. And the newest British nuclear attack submarine has been built with very significant U.S. manufacturing assistance as well.

As a RAND report published in 2011 highlighted:

“In 2003, the MOD solicited the help of General Dynamics Electric Boat through a foreign military sales agreement with the United States. Approximately 100 experienced Electric Boat designers and managers about a dozen of them on-site at the Barrow shipyard and the rest back in the United States—began to interact with BAE Systems and help with the design effort.

"The Electric Boat designers helped set up the design tool and processes at the prime contractor and started to develop the detailed drawings necessary for construction through a secure data link between Barrow and Groton.

“Electric Boat also began to transfer production knowledge to the shipyard. It passed along modular construction techniques that it had developed for the Ohio and Virginia classes, including the advanced outfitting of the submarine rings using a vertical method rather than the traditional horizontal process.

"It helped develop an integrated master plan through a separate contract with the MOD’s integrated project team, which further developed the earned value management system being used to track program progress. Eventually, an Electric Boat employee was assigned as the Astute Project Director with BAE Systems at the Barrow shipyard responsible for all aspects of delivery.

“Through the interactions with Electric Boat, the growing expertise of the prime contractor, and the increased involvement of MOD, the design portion of the Astute program started to make progress.”<sup>1</sup>

The template shaped for Astute between the UK and the U.S. Navy is clearly a solid starting point for any Australian-build process going forward. Perhaps without it, no deal would have been reached.

The third ripple effect is with regard to the evolving ADF working relationship with the United States military as well as with other core allies in the region.

In effect, the U.S. Navy, Japan and Australia are working through new ways to deliver ASW or USW capabilities. This means that Japan along with Australia are key players in how the U.S. Navy reworks with its allies an Indo-Pacific approach to ASW or USW in an advanced kill web or team sport approach.

When Ed Timperlake and I visited Norfolk earlier this year, we had a chance to talk with the 2nd Subgroup commander who described the evolving approach quite well. This is clearly an approach being shaped in the Indo-Pac region as well.

We went back discussions with the Rear Admiral then in charge of the Maritime Patrol Reconnaissance Aircraft and then linked that with what Rear Admiral Jim Waters, Commander Submarine Group Two (SUBGRU2) told us.

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Schank, et.al., *Learning from Experience, Volume III: Lessons from the U.K.s Astute Program* (Rand: 2011), p. 44.

As Rear Admiral Garvin, then the MPRA commander, put it last year; “In effect, we are shaping kill web “matesmanship.” Our policy frameworks simply need to catch up with our technologies. Our allies understand the fundamental nature of their region better than we do. If you have properly maintained these important working relationships, both interpersonal and technological, then you will have access to the cultural knowledge and human geography that might otherwise would not be available to you.

“We clearly have closer relationships with some allies than with others, which shapes policy and data sharing. However, the technology is now out there which can allow us, within the right policy framework, to provide data at appropriate security levels much more rapidly than in the past. Those partnerships need to be nurtured and exercised now to help shape our interactive webs into a truly effective strike force over the extended battlespace.”

“Rear Admiral Waters certainly reinforced this point, as in the Atlantic, we have a number of key partners who work ASW and anti-surface warfare as a core competence for their national navies, and their domain knowledge is a key part of the equation in shaping enhanced warfighting capabilities and re-enforcing deterrence. “Because of the complexity of the underwater domain, it is necessarily a team sport. There are people that would love to say, “It’s the submarines. And they do ASW and that’s what they do.”

“And certainly, it’s a major mission for the submarine force. But the threat is so complex, and the environment is so challenging, that you can’t rely on one particular platform to do this mission. We as a navy have evolved a very robust structure of training and assessing and preparing and innovating.

“We’re really good at carrier-centric integration. But our ability to integrate a non-carrier-centric force, like a theater undersea warfare task force, needs to be enhanced. And that was what Black Widow ( a 2020 USW exercise in the Atlantic) represented. We operated as a fleet or a task force to deliver the desired combat effect.”<sup>2</sup>

The final ripple effect which I will discuss in this article is with regard to Europe and its place in the world, and evolving perceptions within Europe with regard to strategic reality.

To some extent, the reactions among some European commentators remind me of my time in Europe in the 1980s during the Euro-Missile crisis. The Soviet Union was deploying new intermediate range nuclear missiles clearly designed against theater targets which enhanced their capability to decouple Western Europe from the United States. The Reagan Administration generated a two-track approach – of negotiation to get rid of those missiles while deploying new missiles in Europe targeting Soviet military targets.

During the 1980s, European critics considered this an unwarranted nuclear escalation by the United States. Authoritarian powers are very good at ratcheting up threats and then characterizing any response of the liberal democracies to those threats as “escalation.”

And the Communist leadership of China has certainly done this with regard to the Australian decision, despite the fact that a nuclear attack submarine force is really a defensive move, clearly protecting

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<sup>2</sup> Robbin Laird and Ed Timperlake, “21<sup>st</sup> Century USW: A Kill Web Team Sport,” Second Line of Defense (March 28, 2021), <https://sldinfo.com/2021/03/21st-century-usw-a-kill-web-team-sport/>.

Australia from the buildup of Chinese military power and after the Chinese directly threatened Australia with long range strikes.

That is not surprising, but the logic is clear: if you respond to our intimidation, you are escalating the crisis. The problem is that a number of European commentators have echoed this calling this a new cold war in the Indo-Pacific region, far from them, and criticizing the Australians for making such a move.

And at the same time, recent public opinion polling in Europe clearly indicates that for most Europeans, the conflict between China and Australia or between China and the United States is not really about them. As Eszter Zalan wrote in the EUObserver: “Most Europeans think that there is a new Cold War unfolding between the U.S. and its rivals, Russia and China - but do not think their own country is involved, a new polling-backed report by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) has found. The report, published on Wednesday (22 September) and based on polling 12 EU countries, also shows that Europeans consider EU institutions to be more likely than their own governments to be in a Cold War with China and Russia alongside Washington.

“The report warns that it could also be explained with a growing gulf between European public opinion and the US, as well as between national approaches and the more hawkish position of the EU's political leadership in Brussels. If this new polling has captured a lasting trend, it reveals that European public is not ready to see the growing tensions with China and Russia as a new Cold war,” Ivan Krastev, co-author of the report, and chair of the Centre for Liberal Strategies said. So far, it is only European institutions rather than European publics that are ready to see the world of tomorrow as a growing system of competition between democracy and authoritarianism,” he added.”<sup>3</sup>

President Macron certainly has been a European leader who gets the challenge. The way the Australian deal and the U.S. and UK leaders handled the deal did him no favors. This is why in my view, I think it behooves leaders in the three states to sort through how to better handle the situation and find ways to do better than the Boris Johnson approach. This is best summed up by the PM himself: “it was time for “some of our dearest friends” to “prenez un grip”.

In short, the Australian strategic decision on attack submarines is an inflection point at which global dynamics might move in very different directions. It does not cause global change, but it clearly is an accelerator to change in terms of the competition between the liberal democracies and the 21<sup>st</sup> century authoritarian states.

But these events added to other recent events should put to rest the persistent forecasters of 2030 and the appropriate force structure for 2030 or 2040 in the defense of the interests of the liberal democracies. In 2019, how many people projected a global pandemic and its crushing impact on globalization. In 2021, how many anticipated the Biden Administration Blitzkrieg withdrawal “strategy” and its unfolding impact on allies and adversaries alike, not the least of which its impact on the United States and its military. In July 2021, how many were forecasting an Australian nuclear attack submarine decision in September of this year.

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<sup>3</sup> Eszter Zalan, “Europeans Think Cold War is Here: But Not for Them,” EUObserver (September 22, 2021), [https://euobserver.com/world/152987?utm\\_source=euobs&utm\\_medium=email](https://euobserver.com/world/152987?utm_source=euobs&utm_medium=email).

All of this should lead to modesty with regard our confidence in accurately projecting the future of conflict in the region or of the optimal force design to deliver the desired crisis management and combat effects.

*Cover Photo: HMAS Rankin sails in company with Indian Navy Ship Kadmaat during AUSINDEX 21. September 5, 2021. Credit: Australian Department of Defence*