



BRIEFING NOTE: **Nuclear-powered submarines** **Oct 2021**

ICAN Australia has major concerns regarding the Australian Government's proposed acquisition of nuclear submarines through the AUKUS partnership.

While Prime Minister Scott Morrison has claimed that Australia is not seeking to establish a nuclear weapons program, we urge the Australian government to give enduring effect to this assurance by signing and ratifying the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Precedent It is unprecedented for a non-nuclear armed nation to acquire nuclear-powered submarines. Australian acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines will motivate others to do the same, indeed it already is.

Nuclear proliferation risks UK and US submarines use highly-enriched uranium, to 93-97%, which can be directly used in nuclear weapons.

The deal would require Australia to be the first to exploit a loophole in the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Former Head of Verification at the International Atomic Energy Agency, Tariq Rauf, says:

Australia's acquisition of SSNs [nuclear-powered attack submarines] under AUKUS could well open a Pandora's Box of proliferation with non-nuclear-weapon States such as Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Iran, Japan, Saudi Arabia and South Korea among others also going in for nuclear-powered submarines and keeping nuclear fuel (both low- and highly-enriched uranium) outside the scope of IAEA safeguards. This would weaken the IAEA safeguards (verification) system already facing challenges from new technologies and open up possibilities of diversion of nuclear material for nuclear weapons.

Escalating tensions Acquiring nuclear submarines to be part of US war and nuclear conflict planning is highly provocative and escalates tensions among nuclear-armed and regional states. Australia should focus on reducing tensions and risks of armed conflict, seeking cooperation with all nations to address urgent shared global challenges.

Further, Australia should not legitimise or involve itself in the war-fighting strategies of nuclear-armed states. The US, Britain and China are investing massively in nuclear weapons modernisation, refusing to abide by their NPT obligations to pursue nuclear disarmament. The UK has recently decided to increase its nuclear weapons cap by 40%, in contravention of the NPT.

Legal concerns

Announced AUKUS plans include arming the proposed submarines with Tomahawk cruise missiles, which can carry either conventional or nuclear warheads, and increased stationing and visits of US/UK military forces in Australia. The stationing of any nuclear weapons in Australia is prohibited under the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (Rarotonga) Treaty. Australia must never host another state's nuclear weapons, and should end rather than increase its role in assisting possible use or threat of use of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear target

Nuclear-powered submarines would increase the priority of targets in Australia for adversaries, including nuclear-armed ones, of the US, UK and Australia. Such targets could include submarine construction sites and host ports. Attack, as well as accidents, would risk radioactive contamination of Australian host cities. Nuclear submarines may also become targets for domestic terrorist threats.

Further, any Australian submarine carrying Tomahawk missiles raises the prospect of inviting nuclear attack. Because an adversary cannot be sure whether such a missile fired was carrying a conventional or nuclear warhead, there is a danger that a worst-case assumption would be made, and a nuclear response initiated.

Next Steps

The 18-month "consultation period" should explore measures that reduce the risk of armed conflict and nuclear war; and ensure that Australia's obligations under the NPT and Rarotonga Treaty are reinforced. The details of the agreement should be open and transparent.

Australia's plans and policies should convincingly support and not undermine nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. The most effective way to do this is for the Australian government to sign and ratify the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Further reading

International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, [*Proposed US/UK nuclear-powered submarines for Australia jeopardise health while escalating an arms race no one can win.*](#)

Tariq Rauf, [*Australia's Nuclear-Powered Submarines Will Risk Opening a Pandora's Box of Proliferation.*](#)

Sébastien Phillipe, [*The new Australia, UK, and US nuclear submarine announcement: a terrible decision for the nonproliferation regime.*](#)