Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Gareth Evans

Would the AUKUS breakdown be good for Australia?

The "AUKUS" partnership, the 2021 deal whereby the United States and the United Kingdom agreed to provide Australia with at least eight nuclear-propelled submarines over the next three decades, has come under review by the US Defense Department.

The prospect of its collapse has generated predictable handwringing among those who welcomed the deepening alliance, and especially among those interested in seeing Australia inject billions of dollars into underfunded, underperforming American and British naval shipyards. But in Australia, an AUKUS breakdown should be a cause for celebration.

After all, there has never been any certainty that the promised subs would arrive on time.

The US is supposed to supply three, or possibly five, Virginia-class submarines from 2032, with another five newly designed SSN-AUKUS-class subs (built mainly in the UK) coming into service from the early 2040s.

But the US and the UK's industrial capacity is already strained, owing to their own national submarine-building targets, and both have explicit opt-out rights.

Some analysts assume that the Defense Department review is just another Trumpian extortion exercise, designed to extract an even bigger financial commitment from Australia.

But while comforting to some Australians (though not anyone in the Treasury), this interpretation is misconceived.

Concerns in Washington

There are very real concerns in Washington that even with more Australian dollars devoted to expanding shipyard capacity, the US will not be able to increase production to the extent required to make available three – let alone five – Virginia-class subs by the early 2030s.

Moreover, Elbridge Colby, the US Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy who is leading the review, has long been a skeptic of the project, and he will not hesitate to put America's own new-boat target first.

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Even in the unlikely event that everything falls smoothly into place – from the transfers of Virginia-class subs to the construction of new British boats, with no human-resource bottlenecks or cost overruns – Australia will be waiting decades for the last boat to arrive.

But given that our existing geriatric Collins-class fleet is already on life support, this timeline poses a serious challenge. How will we address our capability gap in the meantime?

Cost-benefit analysis

Cost-benefit analysis should have killed the project from the outset. But in their eagerness to embrace the deal, political leaders on both sides of parliament failed to review properly what was being proposed.

Even acknowledging the greatly superior speed and endurance of nuclear-powered subs, and accepting the heroic assumption that their underwater undetectability will remain immune from technological challenge throughout their lifetimes, the final fleet size seems hardly fit for the purpose of national defense.

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Just how much intelligence gathering, archipelagic chokepoint protection, sea-lane

safeguarding, or even deterrence at a distance will be possible under such conditions?

Moreover, the program's eye-watering cost will make it difficult to acquire the other capabilities that are already reshaping the nature of modern warfare: state-of-the-art drones, missiles, aircraft, and cyber defense.

Implications for Australia's sovereignty

The remaining reason for believing, as former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating put it, that an American opt-out "will be the moment Washington saves Australia from itself," concerns AUKUS's negative implications for Australia's sovereignty.

The Americans agreed to the deal because they saw it to be in their strategic interest, not ours. As then-US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell observed (indiscreetly) last year, "we have them locked in now for the next 40 years."

It defies credibility to believe that the US would transfer such a sensitive technology to us – with all the associated emphasis on the "interchangeability" of our fleets and new basing arrangements in Australia – unless it could avail itself of these subs in a future war.

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I have had personal ministerial experience of being a junior US ally in a hot conflict situation – the first Gulf War in 1991 – and my recollections are not pretty.

All that AUKUS and its associated alliance commitments have done for Australia is paint more targets on our back. Alongside the Pine Gap satellite communications and signals intelligence facility – which has always been a bull's-eye – one can add Perth's Stirling submarine base, the Northern Territory, with its US Marine and B-52 bases, and possibly a future east-coast submarine base.

Thinking outside the US alliance box

The crazy irony is that we are spending huge sums to build a new capability intended to defend us from military threats that are most likely to arise simply because we have that capability – and using it to support the US, without any guarantee of support in return should we ever need it.

A better defense option may simply be to recognize that the latest revolution in military technology is real - Gareth Evans

If the AUKUS project does collapse, it would arguably still be possible for Australia to acquire replacements for its aging submarine fleet within a reasonable time frame – and probably at less cost, while retaining real sovereign control – by purchasing off-the-shelf technology elsewhere.

One can even imagine us going back to France, which was snubbed in the AUKUS deal, and making a bid for its new-generation Suffren-class nuclear-powered sub.

But a better defense option may simply be to recognize that the latest revolution in military technology is real, and that our huge continent and maritime surroundings will be better protected by a combination of self-managed air, missile, underwater, and cyber detection capabilities than by a handful of crewed

submarines. There is no better time to start thinking outside the US alliance box.

Gareth Evans was Australia's foreign minister (1988-96), president of the International Crisis Group (2000-09), and chancellor of the Australian National University (2010-19).