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## *AUKUS–IS THERE AN OPTIMAL PATHWAY?*

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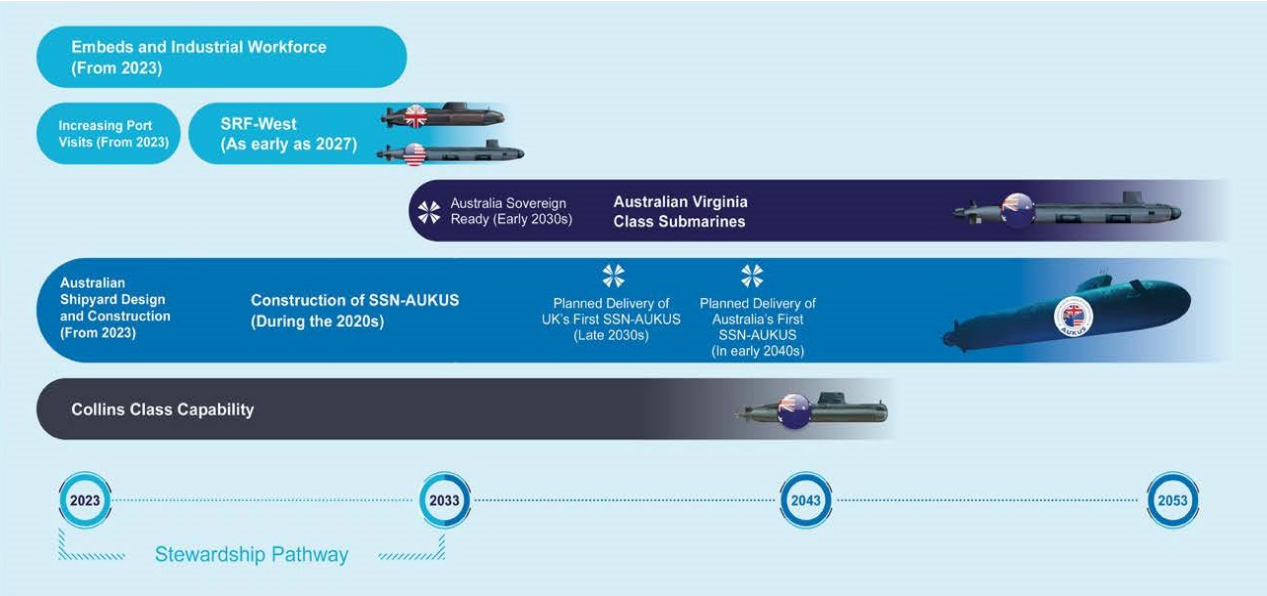
The AUKUS nations announced their "optimal pathway" in 2023, which laid out the process and timeline for Australia to acquire nuclear-powered submarines, as depicted by the slide below. This is what is referred to as Pillar 1 of AUKUS, whereas Pillar 2 includes a host of advanced capabilities that the three nations plan to develop together.

Pillar 2 has been in the news recently with speculation that both Japan and Canada may join the security agreement. While this may have some merit, there is no talk of any other nations being brought into Pillar 1, which is the focus of this article.

Some have challenged the assumption that this is the optimal pathway, suggesting that if the Royal Australian Navy acquires the Virginia Class from the United States they should then stay with a US-designed submarine. While this is logical, it is not practicable for several reasons that have been thought through by those involved over many months of deliberations. This article aims to better inform why the optimal pathway has been selected and highlights some of the challenges that will need to be overcome along the way.



The initial piece envisages both UK and US SSN submarines (nuclear-powered general-purpose attack subs) visiting western Australian ports together with RAN personal being embedded in these boats and then the establishment of the Submarine Rotation Force West (SRF-West); the intent being to familiarize and grow the experience of the Australia workforce in operating, maintaining, and sustaining nuclear-powered submarines. This is a significant undertaking both from a practical operator perspective, and to grow the necessary deep expertise to populate the numerous national policy and supervisory roles in the future.

The second part of the strategy envisages the RAN acquiring 3 of their own Virginia Class SSNs manufactured in the USA. The first two are likely to be previously used submarines with the possibility of the third being delivered straight from the US production line—not surprisingly, there is some speculation as to whether this is achievable due to sheer capacity issues; the US has challenge enough producing sufficient submarines for themselves. Clearly the strategy is the result of considerable work between the three nations and is far more than just an aspiration, but make no mistake, the effort required to deliver it is—and will be—considerable.

The final piece of the strategy, in the early 2040s, is the acquisition of SSN AUKUS by the RAN. SSN AUKUS will be "based on the UK's next-generation design that incorporates technology from all three nations, including cutting-edge US submarine technologies. SSN-AUKUS will be the future attack submarine for both Australia and the UK." They should be magnificent machines.

**So what?**

One must start somewhere—the cliché of "every journey starts with a single step" absolutely applies. RAN personnel are already completing training courses in the UK and in the US but there is a very great distance to go. All experienced Australian personnel at all levels can benefit them, and there will only be so much that they can "buy in" from UK and US personnel; this will not be a simple undertaking.

While it could be argued that, having started operations with a US-designed-and-built SSN, the path should be continued; this approach would not be practicable nor frankly optimal. All three nations have a history of operating and training together—yes, the capabilities inherent in an SSN are far greater than those fielded by an SSK, but the basics of submarine warfare have not changed, nor the innate ability and strategic culture of the personnel. Operating a steam propulsion system is similarly far less of a challenge than some would have us all believe; it really is all about nuclear.

Nuclear is a challenge—but not one of pushing buttons and watching dials—it is one of understanding, experience, and cool logic. It is understanding and treating risk, thorough training, supervision, and the development and appreciation of rigorous procedures and the laws of operating parameters. The development of such skills, vital to this program, will best be served not by following a single instructor, but by gaining as much knowledge as possible from multiple sources so that independent expertise can be grown. Only in such a way can a third nation truly become a peer operator and

maintain its operational and political independence.

It is fortuitous for Australia (and not very surprising) that the UK and US have similar design and technology philosophies but the path upon which these three nations have embarked will be long and arduous, and not cheap. The prize at the end of the road is clearly deemed to be enormously valuable.

The greatest challenge, however, is not one of training, growing expertise, or even cadres of operators, it is the development and sustaining of industrial capacity (and infrastructure), performance, time, and cost to build and maintain these magnificent machines.

Defense industry engagement from all three countries will need to be bold and hugely collaborative, facing down IP issues from the earliest possible junction to put them aside and enable the program. It is most reassuring that we already see efforts to overcome such things as ITAR regulations and the establishment of new government regulations to break down barriers to create a shared industrial base across AUKUS nations. This will need to be matched with new ways of working in a truly collaborative fashion across government and industry; no one should underestimate the decision-making, cost, and commitment involved.

**Conclusion**

Pillar 1 of AUKUS is a massive undertaking by Australia and the United Kingdom with significant support from the United States. The timelines are such that there are detractors who say it will never happen but this, we would suggest, assumes there are not the necessary developments in industrial capacity and business performance required. This article has articulated how the program can be delivered over the next few decades and why it is deemed the "Optimal Pathway."

The greatest challenge for this huge undertaking is the development of the requisite industrial capacity that needs to have already started. This will require true collaboration across the three nations and among all industry partners along with the requisite new ways of working to deliver decisions at the speed of relevance; the time to accelerate, develop and invest is now, for the awaiting prize is immense.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*