

***The Ethics of AUKUS:
Diplomatic Duplicity and Proliferation Perils***

Craig Mark, Kyoritsu Women's University, Japan

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Abstract

The AUKUS trilateral security pact was announced between the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia on September 15, 2021. It pledged for the two larger allies to assist the development of nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), as well as broader cooperation in cybersecurity, and development of cruise and hypersonic missiles. AUKUS caused the immediate cancellation of a A\$90 billion contract signed by Australia in 2016 with the French government-owned Naval Group company, to design and deliver a new generation of conventionally powered submarines for the RAN. This contribution will analyse how ethical values came to play a significant role in escalating this diplomatic crisis, as President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Scott Morrison personally accused each other of deceptive conduct. The wider systemic implications for global security will also be examined. Concerns have been raised by arms control scholars and by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), that AUKUS could encourage other non-nuclear armed powers to pursue nuclear submarines, which threatens to erode the non-proliferation arms control regime. This policy decision has thus resulted in a security dilemma for Australia. By engaging in an arms race to deter the growing geopolitical assertiveness of the People's Republic of China, the conservative Morrison government has eroded its relations with traditional ally France, and complicated relations with their mutual US ally. As a national election was called for May 21, 2022, Morrison may also suffer a domestic political cost, due to his ethical mendacity.

Keywords: Australian Diplomacy; Australian Elections; Non-Proliferation

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Introduction

The sudden announcement of the AUKUS agreement in September 2021 was one of the most far-reaching shifts in Australian defence policy in recent times, principally due to its main purpose of acquiring nuclear-powered submarines for the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). The decision generated highly significant foreign diplomatic and domestic political ramifications, which have had a negative impact overall for the Morrison Liberal-National Party (LNP) Coalition government.

This contribution will outline the strategic and political motivations which drove the Australian government to seek a replacement for its aging Collins-class conventional submarine fleet, first considering Japanese boats, before deciding on a French tender. The decision to abandon the French for a nuclear-powered fleet, as the core of the AUKUS agreement, will then be analysed.

The ethically questionable implications of pursuing AUKUS will then be considered; most immediate was the damage to the diplomatic relations between France and Australia. As Australia went into a national election set for May 21, 2022, the deception practiced around AUKUS contributed to the reputational damage of the Morrison government. Finally, the long-term ethical risks to the global nuclear non-proliferation regime, and potential strategic implications for the security of the Pacific region will be examined.

1.Replacing *Collins*

1.1 Submarine fleets of the RAN

The RAN's first submarine fleet comprised two E-class British submarines, both lost early in the First World War. British J-class and O-class fleets were briefly maintained in small numbers in the interwar period, before six British-built *Oberon*-class boats were commissioned between 1967 and 2000, reliant on maintenance and training by the Royal Navy (RN) (Schank et al, 2011: 3-5). To replace the Cold War era *Oberons*, six Swedish-designed *Collins*-class submarines were built by the government owned Australian Submarine Corporation (ASC) at its Adelaide shipyards between 1990 and 2003. They were the most expensive single Australian defence project at the time, as overcoming problems in construction, noise signature, propulsion and combat systems added to the original project costs, to reach around A\$5 billion (Woolner, 2009: 48-49).

Despite Australia's involvement in armed conflicts ranging from the Vietnam to the Iraq Wars, none of the RAN's diesel-electric submarines served in combat during or after the Cold War. Their purpose has instead been to defend the security of Australia's maritime approaches as a latent deterrent force, and more covertly participate in regional surveillance and intelligence-gathering (DoD, 2016: 90).

1.2 The *Soryu* saga

After a review commenced by the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2007, its 2009 Defence White Paper confirmed the *Collins*-class, in service since 1996, would be replaced; their projected retirement date of 2026 was extended into the 2030s (DoD, 2009: 70). The LNP government under Prime Minister Tony Abbott from 2013 initially favoured buying the highly-regarded Japanese *Soryu*-class boats, which would have had the advantage

of reinforcing the steadily growing security ties between Australia and Japan (Mark, 2015). However, in part to delay a potential leadership challenge, Abbott soon came under domestic political pressure to allow a wider tender process. The SEA 1000 Future Submarine Program (FSP) was therefore launched in February 2015, which aimed for local construction of the next generation of 12 conventional submarines, at an estimated cost of over \$50 billion (DoD, 2015).

1.3 The French connection

After considering a range of tenders, including from Japan (which modified the original tender by its consortium to include more Australian-based production), Germany, and Sweden, on April 26, 2016, Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull (who replaced Abbott in a party room vote the previous September) announced the tender had been awarded to the French government-owned weapons manufacturer DCNS, to produce the new *Attack*-class submarines, a conventional version of the nuclear-powered *Barracuda*-class boats built by DCNS for the French Navy. Despite concerns over developing such a unique and untested design, instead of an ‘off-the-shelf’ model, the Turnbull government judged the *Attack*-class would meet the RAN’s requirements for stealth, range, and endurance (Turnbull, 2020: 339-344).

At least 90% of production would be completed in Adelaide, another major appealing factor for the Turnbull government to choose DCNS’s tender, that also involved a consortium with French defence manufacturing conglomerate Thales, which was already constructing military vehicles and equipment in Australia for the Australian Defence Forces (ADF). Turnbull opened an FSP office in Cherbourg in July 2017 (after DCNS had renamed to Naval Group), and a strategic partnership agreement was signed in 2019, for Naval Group to design and construct 12 submarines in Australia. Production was set to commence in 2023; delivery and commissioning was aimed for the early 2030s, although the out-turned cost was estimated to have risen to around A\$80 billion, far higher than the original tender (Brangwin, 2020: 17, 23, 28-33).

2. The AUKUS Deception

2.1 Enter Morrison

The main motivation to upgrade the RAN’s submarine fleet through the FSP was the growing geostrategic power of China, concern over which continued under the government of Liberal Prime Minister Scott Morrison (who replaced Turnbull in a leadership challenge in August 2018). This was reflected in the 2020 Defence Strategic Update, and 2020 Force Structure Plan; these policy documents outlined planned increases to the long-range strike capabilities of the ADF, including long-range missiles, in order to counter the rising strategic challenges to the security of the Indo-Pacific region (Graham, 2020).

The steadily deteriorating relations with China, Australia’s largest trading partner, only accelerated after Morrison demanded an international tribunal to investigate the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan. The Chinese government retaliated with an escalation of tariffs and quotas against Australian exports, and increasingly harsh diplomatic rhetoric (Walker, 2022). Driven by this deteriorating regional security environment, the Morrison government was already preparing to undermine the French tender. This followed increasing dissatisfaction with its delays, reduction in local content to under 60%, and continual

blowouts in the required budget for the FSP. A revised assessment considered the final cost for Naval Group's construction could even reach A\$90 billion; ongoing maintenance could lift the cost even further to A\$145 billion over the submarines' service life (Sheftalovich, 2021).

This more expensive design plan delivered by Naval Group drove the Department of Defence to consider a 'Plan B', revealed in Senate Estimates Committee hearings in June 2021 (Greene, 2021a). Exploratory moves to find an alternative were covertly underway, as the RAN Chief, Vice-Admiral Michael Noonan met the Royal Navy's First Sea Lord at Australia's London High Commission in March 2021. This secret negotiation process to gain assistance from the UK and US to acquire nuclear-powered submarines was termed 'Operation Hookless' by the UK Ministry of Defence (Bergmann, 2021).

Visiting France on the way to the G7 Summit in June, Morrison met with President Emmanuel Macron to raise Australia's concerns with the FSP; Macron reassured that France was fully committed to faster progress (Greene, 2021b). Unbeknownst to Macron, at the G7 Leaders' Summit at Cornwall, Morrison held a meeting with UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and US President Joe Biden, laying the preparations for the shock announcement soon to follow (Lewis, 2021). France was still left unaware though, since as late as August 30, the French and Australian foreign and defence ministers released a joint statement which reconfirmed the importance of the Naval Group FSP, as about A\$2.4 billion had already been spent (Payne, 2021).

2.2 AUKUS unleashed

It was then a profound surprise to nearly all when AUKUS was announced in a joint declaration by Australia, the UK and US on September 15. The central part of the agreement was for the UK and US to assist Australia in developing nuclear-powered submarines; this was a truly remarkable initiative, as this would be the first time a country not armed with nuclear weapons would come to operate nuclear-powered vessels. This would also be the first time for the US and UK to extend their mutually shared defence-related nuclear technology outside the 1958 US-UK Mutual Defence Agreement. Increased cooperation between the three countries would also proceed in areas of cybersecurity, such as artificial intelligence and quantum technology (White House, 2021).

By announcing AUKUS, Morrison simultaneously declared the Naval Group contract was to be cancelled, due to the changing strategic circumstances of the region (Graham, 2021). Replacing the conventional submarines was justified as giving the RAN greater operational flexibility, as nuclear-powered boats travel at faster speeds, and can have far longer time on station. Having a fleet of at least eight nuclear-powered boats would therefore grant far greater range and endurance, and hence potential striking power, which would enhance deterrence. While the rise of China's strategic power in the region was not overtly mentioned, it was clear that deterring its armed forces in the East China Sea was the motivation for the pact (Curran, 2021). AUKUS was swiftly condemned by China; its state media and foreign ministry accused the three allied member states of pursuing an 'obsolete Cold War mentality', which had now turned Australia into 'an adversary of China' (BBC, 2021a).

Morrison announced a taskforce would be established for at least 18 months of consultation to determine which model of submarine would be selected – widely considered to be a choice between either the US *Virginia*-class, or the UK's *Astute*-class (Nicholls, Dowie and Hellyer,

2021). Whichever is chosen, constructing nuclear-powered submarines will delay the delivery of the next generation of RAN submarines even further, into the 2040s at least; this will require the *Collins-class* boats to have their service life extended yet again, to reach around fifty years, with the refit expense estimated at twice their original cost (Hellyer, 2021).

The cost of building eight nuclear submarines in Australia has been estimated to be over \$170 billion, nearly twice the cost of the French tender. However, even after the future boat model is eventually decided, there is still no indication of how much construction will be carried out within Australia. The lack of nuclear production facilities means that most if not all essential construction, plus much of the future servicing and maintenance, will have to take place either in the US or UK, unlike the previous conventional submarine proposed tenders (Wood, 2021).

2.3 *J'Accuse*

France was understandably outraged by the sudden cancellation, which caused the worst diplomatic breach with Australia since the era of French nuclear testing in the South Pacific in the 1980s and 1990s (Firth, 1999:126-129). The French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian stated that AUKUS was a 'stab in the back', and the French ambassadors to Australia and the US were recalled in protest (Acosta, Atwood & Vazquez, 2021).

At the Rome G20 Summit in November, after an awkward brief meeting with Morrison, President Macron was asked by Australian media if he thought he was lied to by Morrison over the contract's cancellation; Macron replied, "I don't think, I know!" After this accusation by Macron, Morrison claimed the French contract had indeed been abandoned due to problems with delays, content and cost blowouts, which directly contradicted his government's stated position in September (Fathi, 2021). Former prime minister Turnbull (no doubt still nursing some resentment over his ouster by Morrison in 2018) fiercely criticised Morrison's handling of the dispute, backing up Macron's stunningly blunt claims that Morrison was a liar. Turnbull stated that national security had been damaged by Australia's breach of trust, making it an untrustworthy and unreliable partner, eroding its status with allies (Butler, 2021).

The US was inevitably drawn into the diplomatic dispute, with President Biden essentially backing Macron; Biden admitted that breaking the French submarine deal was 'clumsy', and thought France had been made aware earlier. Morrison's Prime Minister's Office (PMO) then leaked further documents purporting to show the Biden administration had been aware the French deal had to be abandoned. This shows how the PMO was even willing to contradict and potentially embarrass its US ally, in order to save face against France, and project strength to a domestic political audience in an election year (BBC 2021b).

Encouraged by the UK to support Australia's approach, the impetus for AUKUS was taken up by the Biden administration as it withdrew from Afghanistan, and sought to refocus its strategic direction against China (Howard and Earle, 2021). The AUKUS decision also showed that under the LNP government, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) had become ever more sidelined in Australia's foreign policy processes. The National Security Committee of cabinet, with Morrison at its head, now dominated Australia's strategic direction. The traditional expertise and opinion of the diplomatic corps was bypassed, leaving them surprised and dramatically isolated by the AUKUS decision (Barnes, 2022).

AUKUS also served the wider strategic purpose of reinforcing the traditional alliance with UK, as Macron aimed to lead the post-Brexit European Union towards a foreign policy and security direction less reliant on the US (Kempin, 2021). France officially downgraded Australia in its latest Indo-Pacific Strategy white paper, removing it from the list of strategic partners, with security cooperation now to occur only on a case-by-case basis (MEFA, 2022: 41). The decision of the Morrison government to abandon the *Attack*-class FSP therefore had a direct deleterious impact on Australia's strategic relations with a country that had been an ally in the First World War, and was still a significant world and regional power. Compensation for cancelling the Naval Group contract could end up costing taxpayers A\$5.5 billion, for no submarines delivered (Greene, 2022a).

3. AUKUS and the 2022 Election

3.1 Bipartisan for AUKUS

AUKUS was part of the Morrison government's attempt to project an image of foreign policy expertise for the LNP during an election year, backed up by announcements in the pre-election 2022 budget of record defence spending. However, this attempt to wedge the Opposition as weak on confronting China was largely undermined by Labor's generally bipartisan positions on foreign and defence policy. Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese and shadow foreign affairs minister Senator Penny Wong quickly and clearly stated their support for AUKUS, while criticising the diplomatically disruptive way it was brought about (Wong, 2021).

Of the minor parties, only the Australian Greens pledged to oppose AUKUS, reduce military spending, renegotiate the ANZUS alliance, and close all foreign bases, should they hold the balance of power in the Senate after the 2022 election (Steele-John, 2021). Given the bipartisan support for AUKUS and ANZUS from the two major parties, this stance by the Greens can only remain a symbolic ideal.

Morrison's pre-election national security address to the Lowy Institute foreign policy thinktank in March 2022 restated the necessity of AUKUS and its nuclear-powered submarines. Morrison stated that this was due to an 'arc of autocracy' confronting Australia with its worst security environment in 80 years, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine the previous month, as well as the relentless geopolitical ambitions of China. Any decision on whether to select a UK or US model for the submarines would be made after the election (contradicting earlier statements by his Defence Minister, Peter Dutton), and that A\$10 billion would be allocated for a new base for the submarines on the east coast, at a location also to be later determined (Bongiorno, 2022).

The move to acquire nuclear-powered submarines was part of another historic announcement of a massive expansion of the ADF planned by the Morrison government, as part of its pre-election positioning to boost its national security image. It will be the largest expansion of the ADF since the Vietnam War, aiming to add over 18,000 personnel across the three services (including the highly-trained submariners and nuclear-qualified support personnel that will be required to crew and service the future submarines), to around 80,000. The upgrade will include new units dedicated to cyber warfare, as part of the AUKUS agreement, and long-range cruise and hypersonic missiles (Greene, 2022b).

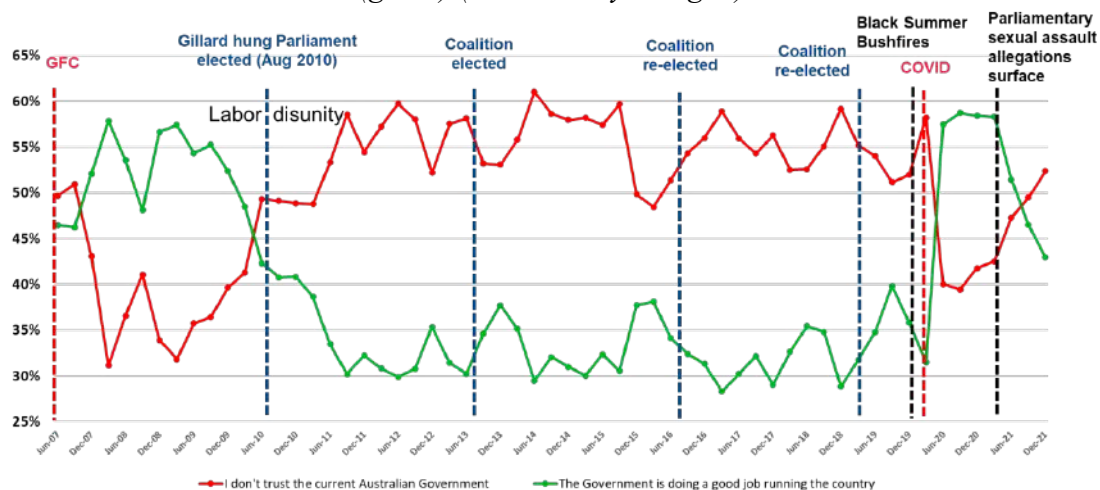
These plans were confirmed in the 2022 budget delivered on March 29, which announced an increased cybersecurity program (termed REDSPICE), costing nearly \$10 billion over the next ten years (although most of this spending will be redirected from already allocated funding). This will see the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) double in size; the budget did not offer any further details on nuclear submarine acquisition though (Haskell-Dowland, 2022).

In response, in his pre-election campaign foreign policy speech, Opposition Leader Albanese committed Labor to matching, and even possibly exceeding the LNP's plans for higher defence spending, with suggestions of even higher numbers for warship construction, and plans to equip the AUKUS-provided submarines with US-supplied Tomahawk cruise missiles (Albanese, 2022a). Meanwhile, Senator Wong indicated a diplomatic improvement of relations with China would be possible under Labor, should the LNP abandon its partisan attempts to manipulate national security and foreign policy issues (Murphy & Hurst, 2022).

3.2 Australian political malaise

Such manipulation of important issues for short-term political advantage had long been contributing to a sense of cynicism and disillusionment among the Australian electorate, in the leadup to the 2022 election. According to polling company Roy Morgan, levels of trust in Australian governments have been generally negative under both major parties, since the divisions of the Labor government in 2010 generated by the leadership rivalry between Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. Despite winning election in 2013, and being re-elected in 2016 and 2019, the LNP also had negative levels of trust overall, also largely due to its own leadership turnovers, and broken policy promises (Roy Morgan, 2022).

Figure 1: Government distrust (red) vs Government doing a good job running the country (green) (Source: Roy Morgan)

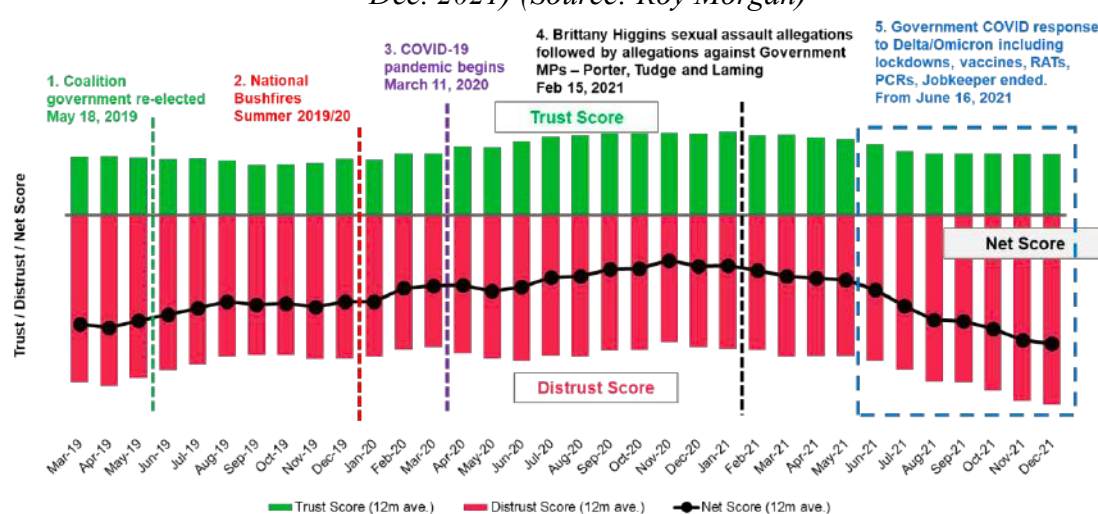


The Morrison government was able to temporarily reverse this trend in its initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but positive trust barely lasted a year, before falling back into overall distrust, after revelations of sexual assault allegations in Parliament against LNP staff, and by LNP ministers. The relatively poorer response by the Morrison government to the Delta and Omicron waves of the pandemic, frustration with ongoing lockdowns, and more recently, tardy emergency responses to floods in Northern NSW and Southeast Queensland have entrenched these low levels of distrust. This has compounded anxiety felt in much of the

electorate about the LNP's lack of action on climate change, which has even brought rebukes from the United Nations (Roy Morgan, 2022).

Ongoing, long-standing allegations of 'pork-barrel' spending of government grants to favour community and sporting projects in government-held or marginal electorates, and the consistent failure of the government to implement a long-promised Federal Integrity Commission have also badly damaged the LNP government's image. Morrison was thus ranked in the Roy Morgan poll as the most distrusted political leader in Australia, followed by Defence Minister Dutton, and Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce. By contrast, Albanese was ranked the second most trusted political leader, only behind Wong, Labor's leader in the Senate (Roy Morgan, 2022).

Figure 2: Government & Government services: Trust, Distrust, and Net Trust (March 2019 - Dec. 2021) (Source: Roy Morgan)



Prior to the election being called, media revelations of text messages by National Party leader Joyce calling Morrison a liar in 2021 (while temporarily on the backbench in between leadership stints, following a 2018 sex scandal), other leaked texts by former Liberal NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian, plus similar criticism from former prime minister Turnbull, all added further damage to Morrison's image, as being profoundly untrustworthy (Grattan, 2022a). There were accusations against Morrison of bullying from former female members of parliament, and of racism, stemming from his preselection contest when entering parliament. These allegations were all denied by Morrison, but this intensifying criticism from his own side of politics in the lead-up to the election campaign only added to the negative public perception of Morrison as manipulative and deceptive (Murphy and Butler, 2022).

Once the election campaign was finally called by Morrison on April 10, to be held on May 21, trust in government and the character of political leaders were therefore primed to be major issues, along with economic management, decades-high inflation and cost of living pressures, provision of health care and social services, and dealing with climate change (Baker, 2022). Labor made the controversies over Morrison's character a key focus of their campaign, whereas the LNP and Morrison in response also sought to target Albanese as inauthentic, and inexperienced (despite his serving as Deputy Prime Minister in the previous Labor government). Highlighting the duplicity over the AUKUS deal also tied into the election issue of foreign policy and national security (Wallace, 2022).

Hence, Labor has continually endorsed the AUKUS agreement, but criticised the means through which it was achieved. While the deception perpetrated on the French government by the AUKUS deal is not likely to be primarily remembered by Australian voters as the major reason for distrusting Morrison and his government, it is yet another incremental incident which has contributed to the overall poor perception of the LNP government.

4. Proliferation Perils

4.1 AUKUS vs the NPT

China's opposition to AUKUS was expected, but wider fears were raised about its potentially adverse effect on the global nuclear non-proliferation regime, based around the 1967 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The Morrison government has insisted AUKUS is compliant with the NPT, as Australia remains committed to never constructing or otherwise acquiring nuclear weapons (Kapetas, 2021). Nevertheless, there are concerns over the precedent of a non-nuclear armed power like Australia developing nuclear-powered submarines.

Following the announcement of AUKUS, the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency stated that a special team would be established to examine the legal implications and nuclear safeguards, as more countries building nuclear submarines could have serious proliferation and legal implications. (Findlay, 2021) It is feared by some arms control scholars that AUKUS will undermine the NPT by allowing aspiring proliferators to access highly enriched uranium, and thus allow diversion of fissile material intended to power submarines towards a covert weapons program. This could particularly apply to Iran, and potentially others such as Saudi Arabia, or Brazil, which also plans to build nuclear-powered submarines (Acton, 2021).

South Korea might also be the next non-nuclear armed country to pursue nuclear-powered submarines, inspired by AUKUS; this policy was advocated by the Democratic Party candidate for South Korea's 2022 presidential election, which could yet be taken up in future by the even more hawkish administration of President Yoon Suk Yeol (Shin & Kim, 2021). Japan is similarly concerned by the rising strategic power of China, and the belligerence of neighbouring Russia; given its own domestic submarine production capability and extensive nuclear power industry, it is certainly possible Japan could develop its own nuclear-powered submarines. While this has been so far discounted by current Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, two of his previous rivals for the LDP leadership, former defence minister Taro Kono, and current LDP Policy Chief Sanae Takaichi are in favour of the Maritime Self Defense Forces (SDF) having nuclear-powered boats (Bell, 2022).

Australia and Japan recently concluded a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) between the ADF and SDF, and a similar RAA is being negotiated between Japan and the UK. Japan will therefore soon have a similar level of defence cooperation between two of the AUKUS partners, in addition to its core alliance with the US (Koga, 2022). As Japan is also a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the 'Quad', which includes India), these overlapping multilateral security partnerships, which already involve cooperation in joint forces training, intelligence, and research and development of hypersonic missiles, could well lead to Japan formally joining AUKUS in future (White House, 2022).

However, as the delivery of nuclear submarines to the RAN remains decades away, the more immediate objective of AUKUS is in the realms of cybersecurity, as Australia's ASD and

ADF cyber operations will now come under the coordination of US Cyber Command (ASD, 2022). As well as the eventual commercial benefits for either American or British weapons manufacturers, the main long-term strategic benefit for both the US Navy and Royal Navy will be to gain port access in Australia for their own nuclear-capable submarines (Sadler, 2021).

A 2011 assessment by the Department of Defence found Sydney Harbour to be the best choice for a new (conventional) submarine support base, but this has now been discounted. There is speculation that Port Kembla, at Wollongong on the New South Wales south coast is now the leading contender for a new nuclear submarine port and servicing facility, with other possible sites at either Newcastle or Brisbane (Fernandez, 2022). However, local opposition to potential safety risks could become a difficult political issue, whichever party forms government after the 2022 election (Tran & Khawaldeh, 2022).

4.2 Strategic surprise in the Solomons

Another consequence of AUKUS has been the countervailing strategic move by China to negotiate a security agreement with the Solomon Islands, some 2000 kms away from Australia. If the major purpose of AUKUS was to deliver nuclear-powered submarines that could operate at longer ranges with longer endurance to deter the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), through maintaining a presence in the East and South China Seas, this may have already been circumvented. The prospect of a PLAN presence being established so relatively close to the Australian mainland will require a response by the ADF well before the far-distant delivery of the RAN's planned nuclear-powered submarines (Greene, 2022c).

The signature of a security treaty between the Solomon Islands and China on April 19, despite tardy, last-minute diplomatic intervention by Australian intelligence officials and the junior Minister for International Development and the Pacific, was harshly condemned by Labor as the greatest foreign policy failure in the Pacific since the Second World War. Despite its much vaunted 'Pacific Step Up' policy, the LNP government's steady erosion of the foreign aid budget for the Pacific, and its patronising attitude towards the vulnerable Pacific Island states, due to a largely dismissive approach in tackling climate change were particularly highlighted as factors in the diplomatic neglect of the Solomon Islands, which Labor pledged to reverse (Hitch, 2022).

Other critics pointed out the major intelligence failure under the watch of the Morrison government, which had been informed of China's intentions to pursue an agreement with the Solomon Islands the previous August. This strategic surprise by China, so soon after the start of the election campaign, severely subverted one of the LNP's main hoped-for political advantages, of projecting an image of strength on national security (Keane & Fernandes, 2022). In typically bombastic rhetoric, Defence Minister Dutton again compared China and Russia's behaviour to the rise of Nazi Germany in the 1930s, which justified AUKUS and the Quad, and that Australia should 'prepare for war'. However, the speed of China's growing diplomatic infiltration into the South Pacific has only reminded of how the promise of delivery of nuclear submarines is so far and uncertain into the future (Dziedzic, 2022).

The Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry has denied that China will construct any military bases in the Solomons, and again condemned AUKUS, calling it a 'backroom deal' that lacked transparency (ABC, 2022), a criticism later echoed by Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare (Dziedzic & Jackson, 2022). Given that the PLAN has already surpassed

the US Navy as the world's largest, any future contribution by the RAN to the military balance of the region will remain relatively marginal (Shelbourne, 2021).

In the first leaders' debate of the election campaign, Morrison again attempted to wedge Labor, accusing Albanese of taking China's side on the Solomon Islands diplomatic crisis. Albanese strongly rebuked Morrison for again trying to politicise traditionally bipartisan security policy (Hurst, 2022). National security had been especially highlighted as an election issue by the Russian invasion of Ukraine; as well as imposing sanctions on Russia and providing humanitarian aid, the Morrison government has sent 20 Bushmaster armoured vehicles and six howitzers to the Ukrainian armed forces, all with bipartisan support (Levick, 2022). Labor further boosted its support for AUKUS with its policy to establish the Advanced Strategic Research Agency (ASRA), which would have a budget of A\$1.2 billion to develop defence-related technology, in conjunction with the AUKUS partners (Albanese, 2022b).

Conclusion

At the time of writing past midway through the election campaign, Labor remained ahead of the LNP in opinion polls (Grattan, 2022b). A group of independent candidates termed the 'Teal Independents', predominantly professional-class women campaigning on progressive issues such as climate change, threatened the Liberal Party in some of their traditionally safest urban-held seats. This brought about the possibility of the infrequent result of a hung parliament, and a range of cross-bench Independents and minor parties is also likely set to continue to hold the balance of power in the Senate (Napier-Raman, 2022).

Should the Morrison government be replaced by Labor following the May 21 election, the lies told by Scott Morrison to Emmanuel Macron over ending the submarine contract with France will have likely played an incremental part in eroding the electorate's trust in the LNP. After the domestic political contest of the election is settled, if Labor is returned to office with Anthony Albanese as prime minister, the bipartisan support for AUKUS will ensure acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines for the RAN will continue to proceed, despite the attendant risks to the NPT, and the danger of contributing to the regional arms race. The encroachment of Chinese influence into the Solomon Islands shows how AUKUS has failed to deter China; the nuclear submarines will be massively expensive, not arrive for decades, and will have a tokenistic geostrategic effect, at best.

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Contact email: cwmark@kyoritsu-wu.ac.jp