

AUKUS: A big step toward war

Statement from the Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group about the announcement of the AUKUS partnership

Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group

26 September 2021

The AUKUS partnership announced on 16 September is a big step towards war against China. The centrepiece of its first initiative is the announcement by the Australian Government that it will buy eight nuclear submarines from the United States or the United Kingdom. The reactions to this announcement are almost as significant as the purchase of the submarines themselves.

Australian military procurement since the end of the Vietnam War has been an ongoing debacle, marked by indecision, late changes of direction, huge cost overruns and major delivery delays. These factors have been a permanent embarrassment to successive Australian governments and generations of military brass, but they are not solely the product of simple incompetence. They also result from Australian imperialism's dilemma: being a European outpost on the edge of Asia and being a developed economy with rapidly growing Asian economies for neighbours. Australia's relative decline means it faces an increasing contradiction between its ambitions and its capacity. Attempting to maximise its capacity via military procurement is extremely risky and is resulting in a decrease in the Australian military's strategic autonomy. The submarine decision is a major step in that process.

By deciding to purchase these submarines, the Government has given up pretending that Australia "doesn't have to choose between its history and its geography". It has decisively opted to stand with the United States against a rising China and to do so in an ostentatiously aggressive way. The submarines have a mission which is so obvious to the security establishment that military pundits were describing it openly on the day of the announcement. They are to hang around in straits and channels between islands in what is called the first island chain, a series of large and small islands that separates the South China Sea and the East China Sea from the Pacific Ocean. There, they will help bottle up the Chinese navy and prevent it having free access to the open ocean. The Pacific Ocean is to remain an American lake and Australia has volunteered to help.

However, keeping China in this subordinate position is easier said than done. For over four decades, it has been developing with extraordinary speed. Though it has slowed somewhat in the last few years, its growth is still vastly stronger than that of the US or any other developed country. Its GDP is projected to overtake the US around 2030, give or take a few years depending

on whose crystal ball is consulted. The US has seen off previous challenges to its dominance, with its would-be rivals stalling at about two thirds of US per capita GDP.

China, though, is a different kettle of fish. Its population is four times that of the US, so even if its development stalls at half the US GDP per capita, it will still be double the US GDP in aggregate. The US military advantage over China and its global dominance more generally would become completely unsustainable by then, if not well before. Continued US dominance requires China's development to be halted – either by economic strangulation or, failing that, by war. Indeed, a recent issue of *The Diplomat*, an elite magazine for the Asia Pacific region, said:

“It is probably worth thinking about how and what the the United States might do in order to reduce Chinese economic growth, including aggressive decoupling and the stringent use of financial and technology sanctions.”

The United States and its closest allies (there are none closer than Australia) are attempting to undermine China's Belt and Road Initiative, which is a project by the Chinese so-called “Communist” Party to take China's development to the next level and reorient the economy of the region around it. In addition, the US is increasingly using intellectual property laws to prevent China acquiring technology, trying to prevent China exporting its technology to other countries and waging a trade war against China's exports (something Trump started and Biden hasn't dropped). Australia is somewhat conflicted in this project, since it sells so much iron ore and other minerals to China, but this hasn't prevented it participating in the US campaign. Australia has been especially active in trying to keep the Belt and Road Initiative out of the South Pacific.

However, China's economic strangulation is far from assured. The relative decline of US power in the last half century means that China may still maintain a superior growth path to the US through economic relations with other developing countries, primarily in Asia but also in Africa and even Latin America. US economic warfare may, in fact, backfire and put the US rather than China into the slow lane.

And this is where things get really dangerous. Nobody wants a nuclear war, but nobody wanted World War I either. That war occurred even though the great imperialist powers didn't want it because they wanted something else even less – having their vital national interests subordinated to another power. War with China would occur the same way. The greatest danger is the Thucydides Trap, the temptation for the US to launch a war on China before China becomes too powerful to wage war against.

This, then, is what is driving the AUKUS partnership. It is an attempt to keep China militarily subordinate, even to the extent that it is surrounded by US military bases and cannot sail its navy into the Pacific Ocean without US permission. Australia already plays a vital role by being a vociferous US ally in the region and, even more importantly, being the site for the US spy base at Pine Gap near Alice Springs. This base is essential to the US military satellite system, since without it there would be a large blind spot in its global surveillance. The role of the Australian submarine purchase is to maintain Australia's leverage in the anti-China campaign. Australian capitalists still want to export to China and also want to preserve Australian imperialist interests in the South Pacific.

The submarine purchase, though, is proving to have unintended consequences. The decision to acquire nuclear submarines with US technology required dumping a \$90 billion contract to buy conventional submarines from France. The duplicity of the Australian Government, particularly that of Scott Morrison, Peter Dutton and Marise Payne, has outraged the French Government at a particularly unfortunate time. With the imminent retirement of Angela Merkel, the senior

political leader in the European Union will be the French President, Emmanuel Macron. The Australia-EU Free Trade Agreement, which has been under negotiation for a couple of years, was expected to be concluded very soon. It looks to be an early casualty. More significant is the attitude of France in particular, but the EU generally, towards co-operation with the US over China policy. If France is going to be shafted by its erstwhile allies in the Pacific, it's a lot less likely to see things Uncle Sam's way when the US President wants a common front against China.

Even more important still, especially for Australian imperialism, is reaction in the Asia Pacific. The media constantly refer to unnamed countries which support the submarine acquisition and the US anti-China campaign. Two states which might conceivably approve are Japan and Vietnam, neither of which would be keen to advertise the fact. Meanwhile, both Malaysia and Indonesia have publicly expressed concern. Neither are particularly fond of China, but they definitely don't want a regional arms race. And an arms race is what they will get, since Beijing won't be taking the submarine announcement lying down.

While it is possible that the Australian Government under Scott Morrison has simply blundered into this situation (much of his Cabinet, including Morrison himself, have failed upward), the same cannot be said of the United States. Joe Biden is an old foreign policy hand and came to office promising to rebuild US relationships after the chaos and unpredictability of the Trump years. The US has made a conscious choice in how it addresses relations with China. Instead of building a broad alliance to push back against poor behaviour by China, it has put together a narrow one (reminiscent of the "Coalition of the Willing" in 2003) to stake out an aggressive military posture. This is not an accident. The US and China are on a path to war and AUKUS is a big step towards launching it.

China is entitled to become a developed country and its population is entitled to the standard of living which comes with that. The US attempt to strangle its economic development and keep it a poor country is a crime against humanity and the barely hidden threat of nuclear war is an even bigger one. Over the next few years, we can expect a strong media campaign in the US, UK and Australia concerning a multitude of complaints against China. Some of these (notably its treatment of the Uighurs in Xinjiang, the Tibetans and the people of Hong Kong) will be real crimes by the Chinese so-called "Communist" Party. Regardless of whether Beijing's crimes are real or imagined, though, the motivation for the complaints will be the same. They will be attempting to solidify public opinion behind the anti-China policy and the path to war.

In Australia, the public opinion campaign will have one certain result. There will be a massive increase in racism directed at people of Chinese background or appearance. Anti-Chinese racism has been officially frowned on by Australian governments for about three decades. They have preferred to use Aboriginal people, Muslims and, lately, Africans as their lightning rods for social discontent. Developing confrontation with China will change that. Chinese migrants, their children and even people of Chinese extraction whose family have been here for generations will be seen as a potential fifth column. They will be subject to random violence and abuse in the street, suffer discrimination justified by patriotic reasoning and receive unceasing demands to demonstrate their loyalty to Australia and their hostility to Beijing. It won't be pretty.

The Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group calls on the labour movement in Australia to oppose the AUKUS partnership and its anti-China campaign. The nuclear submarine purchase underlines our established position: not a person, not a penny for the imperialist Australian military! We have no illusions in the Chinese so-called "Communist" Party. It is a gang of corrupt bureaucrats whose Stalinism is so degenerate that it celebrates Chinese billionaires. There are

more US dollar millionaires in Beijing's National People's Congress than there are in the US Congress. Our opposition to AUKUS instead derives from our opposition to our own ruling class.

Against the AUKUS partnership and the looming threat of war against China, the MACG raises the banner of international working class solidarity. We are opposed to all governments worldwide, but our task is to overthrow the capitalist class here in Australia. Our aim is for a workers' revolution which sweeps the world, toppling all ruling classes without distinction. This revolution will abolish imperialism by abolishing the nation state. In its place will flower a global community, organised on the basis of consistent federalism and practicing libertarian communism. Now, that's something to fight for.

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DOWN WITH ANZUS!
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