

Proposed US/UK Nuclear-powered Submarines for Australia: Jeopardising Health and Fueling an Arms Race

Summary of joint statement by IPPNW and its affiliates in Australia, UK and US

By [IPPNW](#)

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Health professionals in Australia, the UK and the US have expressed their deep concerns at Australia’s proposed acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines with UK and US assistance, stating that the plan will jeopardise global health and security. [Their concerns are set out in a briefing paper.](#)

IPPNW Co-President Dr Tilman Ruff said

“Humanity is in the midst of a major pandemic, and facing twin existential threats of dire urgency—global heating and the growing danger of nuclear war. COVID vaccines are still out of reach for most of the world’s poor people. If ever there was a time to build goodwill, and focus on cooperation to address complex global problems, that time is now. Instead, the proposed submarines would increase tensions and militarisation across Asia and the Pacific region, fuel an arms race and risk deepening a new cold war involving China. They would embroil Australia in a nuclear war-fighting strategy, increase the danger of armed conflict erupting and escalating to nuclear war in which there could be no winners.”

Australia’s submarines are very likely to be fueled, as US and UK submarines are, by highly enriched uranium (HEU), which is directly usable in nuclear weapons. The US and the UK have resisted and delayed efforts to convert their naval reactors to much less proliferation-prone low-enriched uranium fuel (LEU) as France and China have done.

The proposed Australian submarines could well encourage other states, such as South Korea, Japan and Iran to pursue a similar path. Some within Australia, including within government, have used the recent announcement to call for Australia to embrace nuclear power and, alarmingly, there are calls for Australia to be prepared to acquire its own nuclear

weapons. Submarine reactors fuelled with HEU would provide raw material with which to achieve this goal.

Dr Sue Wareham, President of the Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia), said,

“The nuclear weapons proliferation potential of this deal will be significant. A government assurance on the matter is totally inadequate. Other nations will see it differently.”

Adding to proliferation risks is the UK announcement in March of a planned 40% increase in its nuclear arsenal, which is in breach of its nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations. The UK and US are modernising their nuclear arsenals, also in breach of their NPT commitment to disarm.

Dr Elisabeth McElderry, International Councillor of Medact (UK), said of the new agreement

“Resources are needed both at home and worldwide to improve health and care services, and to reduce the drivers of conflict, displacement and disease. It is very disappointing that the United Kingdom continues to promote armament exports, in this case with added nuclear dangers, which goes in the opposite direction of the UK Government statement in May of this year that ‘investing in conflict prevention is the right thing to do.’”

There is the additional risk of accidents and terrorist attack. Such disasters while a nuclear-powered vessel is in port risks harmful radioactive contamination of cities. Many cities around the world oppose visits of such vessels to their harbours for that reason. A total of 8 nuclear-powered submarines have sunk because of accidents at sea between 1963 and 2003, contributing to the radioactive pollution of our oceans.

The high level radioactive waste from reactors poses a further long-term problem for which there is thus far no solution. Already, Australia’s problem of managing its much smaller amount of intermediate level radioactive waste is not resolved.

All three nations involved in this deal should turn their attention from arming the world to supporting global efforts for a nuclear weapons free world. The most important step that they—and other nations that have not done so—could take to hasten this goal would be to join the 2017 UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

Dr David E. Drake, President of Physicians for Social Responsibility (USA), noted

“Let’s not forget that ‘On the Beach’ depicted the end of the world, focused on Australia. Instead of ramping up a new cold war, we must cooperate to decrease tensions and work toward eliminating all weapons of mass destruction, while we still can.”

If Australia does proceed to acquire nuclear submarines, it should insist on LEU fuel and implement stringent safeguards, the submarines should be configured so that they cannot carry nuclear weapons, and nothing about their construction or operation should impede Australia joining the TPNW.

All nations, including Australia, the US and the UK, should be doing absolutely everything possible to avoid a military escalation and confrontation with China, and reduce rather than exacerbate the danger of nuclear war.

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Featured image: The USS John Warner, a nuclear-powered submarine of the type Australia will soon be developing. Source: US Navy

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