The Roots of Australian Navalism: AUKUS and Political History

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The morning of 4 October 1913 was dull and grey but also the grandest day many Sydneysiders could recall in their lives. On that Saturday morning, seven ships – the nucleus of the new Royal Australian Navy (RAN), led by the flagship HMAS *Australia* – came into view on Sydney Harbour, emerging out of the mist. 'One thought of Philip and the First Fleet, a century and a quarter ago, heading for the self same harbour', declared the *Sydney Morning Herald*, in a dramatic flourish connecting this milestone in Australian nationhood with the original British invasion of the continent. The band on the flagship played *Rule, Britannia!* as the fleet passed through Sydney Heads, and the thousands of people lining the shores cheered heartily as another band, on a steamer chartered by the government, played *Home Sweet Home*.[1]

Even as youngsters dressed in red, white and blue waved their little Australian flags, the rituals being enacted that October morning were those of Greater Britain, not of an independent Australia.[2] Many Australians who had not even been to the United Kingdom called it home. A few years before, in 1908, with similar levels of enthusiasm to 1913, Sydneysiders had cheered the visit of the United States of America's 'Great White Fleet'. Alfred Deakin, the prime minister of the day, had engineered that visit, in part, as a demonstration to Britain, which was withdrawing its ships to home waters. If Britain could not offer Australia sufficient protection against a rising Japan, Deakin's actions suggested, the young Commonwealth would need to turn to the United States for support. The popularity of the visit, Deakin explained in a letter to a British correspondent, was the result of 'our distrust of the Yellow Race in the North Pacific and our recognition of the "entente cordiale" spreading among all white men who realise the Yellow Peril to Caucasian civilization, creeds and politics'.[3]

The AUKUS agreement (2021) has usually been presented as a response to the novelty of Australia's strategic circumstances in the twenty-first century. 'A world transformed' is the title of an early chapter of the journalist Paul Kelly's book *Morrison's Mission: How a beginner reshaped Australian foreign policy* (2022).[4] Much of the rhetoric that has accompanied AUKUS has emphasised its ground-breaking character. AUKUS, it is argued, is a response to novel circumstances such as a new aggression on the part of the Chinese government, the rise of an Indo-Pacific community (represented, for instance, by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or 'Quad'), a reluctance of the United States to continue unabated its global leadership role, and the redundancy of old submarine technologies. For Kelly, as for many commentators, AUKUS is the product of these seismic changes. But the argument I put in this paper is that it also rests on much older concerns and sensibilities: notably, the problem of defending a nation that has continued to regard itself as white, western and capitalist from security threats posed by Asian powers seeking to challenge to so-called rules-based international order.

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[1] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 October 1913, p. 5.

[2] Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007.

[3] Alfred Deakin to Richard Jebb, 4 June 1908, in Neville Meaney, *Australia and the World: A Documentary History from the 1870s to the 1970s*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1985, p. 173.

[4] Paul Kelly, *Morrison's Mission: How a beginner reshaped Australian foreign policy: A Lowy Institute Paper*, Penguin Books, [Melbourne], 2022, ch. 2.

Viewed from the perspective of partisan differences between the major political parties, some commentators have seen in AUKUS a departure from Labor traditions in foreign and defence policy.[5] AUKUS was initiated under the conservative Coalition government of Scott Morrison, but it has been given much of its specific content by the Labor government of Anthony Albanese that came to office in May 2022. Labor has often been identified with the security doctrine called 'Defence of Australia': the idea that defence policy should be designed to protect the continent itself from an attack, with a focus on air and naval defence of the country's northern approaches. The alternative approach, associated especially with the Coalition government's commitment to the Vietnam War in the 1960s, is called 'Forward Defence'. Labor, for its part, has often been suspicious of, or directly opposed to, this idea that Australia should deploy its forces overseas – in theory, to meet enemies before than can approach closer to home, in practice to provide political support to the United States and encourage its engagement in the region.[6] In one telling, AUKUS embraces a version of forward defence and is therefore a departure for Labor from its dominant foreign policy tradition.[7] The harsh criticisms of AUKUS offered by former Labor prime minister, Paul Keating, have contributed to an impression that it represents a departure from previous patterns.[8] Labor, it is argued, is the party of positive Asian engagement, independence within the US alliance, multilateral cooperation and liberal internationalism, distinguished as a strong supporter of the United Nations (UN) and activist in international affairs. The conservative coalition parties are often presented in this scenario as more enamoured of foreign policy realism, or at least of alliance politics, and less sympathetic to the UN. The alignments in these 'traditions' tend to be untidy at best and subject to considerable contestation, yet not without some foundation in reality.[9] That said, there is a strong Labor tradition of foreign and defence policy realism, too – the Whitlam government's recognition of China stands as a supreme example – and the early history of the party saw an embrace of both naval power and compulsory military training. Humphrey McQueen, in his classic New Left history of 1970, *A New Britannia*, saw Labor's support for naval power as an aspect of its enthusiastic support for the racial exclusion of the White Australia Policy.[10]

The argument I make in this paper is indebted to a strand of thinking about the history of Australia's place in the world found in the work of commentators such as McQueen, Neville

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[5] David Lee, 'AUKUS and the Labor Tradition', *Arena* [forthcoming June 2023].

[6] Richard Dunley, 'The end of the "lucky country"? Understanding the failure of the AUKUS policy debate', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, published 31 May 2023, https://doi-org.virtual.anu.edu.au/10.1080/10357718.2023.2210278

[7] Lee, 'AUKUS and the Labor Tradition'.

[8] Brett Worthington, 'Paul Keating savages AUKUS nuclear submarine deal as Labor's worst since conscription', ABC News, 15 March 2023, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-03-15/paul-keating-anthony-albanese-penny-wong-aukus-nuclear-china/10209814

[9] David Lee and Christopher Waters (eds), *Evatt to Evans: the Labor Tradition in Australian Foreign Policy*, Allen & Unwin and Department of International Relations, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, St. Leonards (NSW), and Canberra, 1997 and David Lowe, 'Introduction', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* [Special Issue, David Lowe (ed.): 'The Liberal Tradition in Australian Foreign Policy'], Vol. 51, No. 3, 2005, pp. 327-31, and other articles in this issue.

[10] Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia*, Revised Edition, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2004 [1970], pp. 90-2.

Meaney, Greg Lockhart, John Mordike, Peter Cochrane, Anthony Burke and, on AUKUS itself, Clinton Fernandes, who have to varying degrees emphasised the imperial, acquisitive, ethnic and racial dimensions of Australia's search for security.[11] Fernandes, writing most recently, argues that Australia is best thought of not as a 'middle power', a familiar terminology in mainstream foreign policy discourse, but as a 'sub-imperial power': subordinate to the imperial centre, Washington; devoted to defending 'a rules-based international order', a euphemism for US imperialism; and projecting considerable power in its own region as a willing and privileged partner in an American imperial enterprise.[12] My argument will not follow Fernandes all of the distance that he invites us to travel with him, but his argument does have the virtue of drawing our attention to the embeddedness of AUKUS in a long history, entrenched mentalities, and abiding structures and interests.

Geography also matters. Richard Dunley has recently, with admirable succinctness, set out the enduring aspects of Australia's strategic dilemma. The basic problem is that Australia is too large, has too small a population, and is too distant from most other places to be able to provide for its key strategic requirements.[13] The problem has existed since the first French ship, that of Jean-François de Galaup La Pérouse, showed up in Botany Bay in January 1788. That means Australia has always felt the need to rely on larger and more powerful allies: Great Britain, at first, and later the United States. The regional predominance of one or the other of these powers for almost all of the settler history of Australia has secured for Australia a benign security environment except for a few years in the early 1940s, but even then, the sheer size and isolation of the continent revealed its double edge: it made a Japanese invasion virtually impossible. In any event, US naval power soon asserted itself.[14]

Australia has pursued its strategic goals in slightly different ways at different times. The relations of the Australian colonies, and then the Australian Commonwealth, with Britain were not really an alliance politics so much as a global system and imagined community in which imperial elites understood the United Kingdom and the colonies and dominions as embodying an internal diversity and variety that found transcendence in common allegiance to the crown.[15] The governing authorities in different parts of the settler empire, in particular, might have divergent economic and strategic perspectives and even, on occasion, disagree sharply, but a deep and multifaceted common belonging and commitment to British liberty meant that differences were understood as only ever likely to be superficial and temporary.[16] In particular, Australia's ultimate dependence on the Royal Navy for security meant that it was almost impossible to think about Australian defence except in the context of a wider imperial relationship.[17] In a diverse empire made up of many ethnicities and religions, and a variety of political arrangements and relationships with the metropole, Australians had increasingly deployed the concept of race, and specifically a language of whiteness, to assert a roughly equal (and sometimes superior) status between themselves and other white subjects of the empire – and, of course, a superiority over people of colour, whether found in India, Kenya, Jamaica or the backblocks of Queensland.[18]

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[11] McQueen, *A New Britannia*; Neville Meaney, *A History of Australian Defence and Foreign Policy, 1901-23*, Vol. 1 (*The Search for Security in the Pacific, 1901-1914*) and Vol. 2 (*Australia and World Crisis, 1914-1923*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 2009; Greg Lockhart, '"We're so Alone": Two Versions of the Void in Australian Military History', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 120, October 2002, pp. 389-97; John Mordike, *'We should do this thing quietly': Japan and the Great Deception in Australian Defence Policy 1911-1914*, Aerospace Centre, Canberra, 2002; Peter Cochrane, *Best We Forget: The War for White Australia, 1914-18*, Text, Melbourne, 2018; Anthony Burke, *Fear of Security: Australia's Invasion Anxiety*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008; Clinton Fernandes, *Sub-Imperial Power: Australia in the International Arena*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2022.

[12] Fernandes, *Sub-Imperial Power*, p. 21.

[13] Dunley, 'The end of the "lucky country"?, p. 2.

[14] Peter Stanley, *Invading Australia: Japan and the Battle for Australia, 1942*, Viking, Camberwell, 2008, p. 158; Steven Bullard, 'Japanese Strategy and Intentions Towards Australia', in Peter Dean (ed.), *Australia 1942: In the Shadow of the War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 124-139.

[15] John Darwin, *The Empire Project: the Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983; David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire*, Allen Lane, London, 2001.

From 1902 the newly federated Commonwealth of Australia paid the British government £200,000 per year as a subsidy for naval defence. But to critics, there was something undignified about a new nation paying for someone else to defend it. Australia's elite of 'independent Australian Britons', as they were called by Alfred Deakin, were happy to be part of an empire but not to be thought colonial.[19] As Deakin understood the matter, while it might be logical for a country that had no say over foreign policy to pay someone else to take over responsibility for its defence, a country that actually aspired to a say in the foreign policy of the British Empire, as Australia did, would need to do better. Deakin initially favoured a fleet designed for coastal defence and, from 1907, he insisted that the Australian government would control how it was to be used. But the British Admiralty had no great interest in such dispersal of resources and effort.[20]

The navy formed by 1913 was of a different order. Nicholas Lambert points out that it was designed to form a fleet unit within a larger imperial force; it was built not in a spirit of independent national assertion, but with full Admiralty encouragement, assistance and cooperation as a contribution to the British Empire's sea power. The Dreadnought scare of 1909 was part of the background to these developments: that is, the fear that Imperial Germany might soon overtake Great Britain in its possession of capital ships. Australia and New Zealand each agreed to pay for a Dreadnought, the grand battleship of the era, to help Britain in this race.[21]

As it happened, the RAN would be eventually built to a different plan again. It would conform to a vision of the Royal Navy being propounded by Admiral John Fisher, the First Sea Lord: instead of building big battleships such as Dreadnoughts, he envisaged flying squadrons of smaller battle cruisers to protect the empire's trade routes. When Australia and New Zealand had offered to fund a Dreadnought each, Fisher managed to gain Admiralty support for redirecting their efforts into the acquisition of battle cruisers, destroyers and submarines. Importantly, personnel would be interchangeable between the navies, an arrangement made possible because the fleet units were the same; we can hear echoes of this preoccupation in present-day concern with 'interoperability' between Australian and United States defence assets and provisions for the exchange of personnel.[22] 'The Royal Navy was effectively offering to provide Australians with virtually their own independent strategic deterrent', Lambert comments.[23] The arrival of Australia's own navy in 1913 was, said the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'the splendid realisation of the dream of years – a dream that was born of our nationhood'. 'A separate navy, and yet attached to the Royal Navy, with the same traditions to live up to, the same worlds to keep. A thing apart, and yet part of a glorious and indivisible whole.'[24]

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[16] Neville Meaney, 'Britishness and Australian Identity: The Problem of Nationalism in Australian History and Historiography', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 116, 2001, pp. 76-90.

[17] Stuart Ward, 'Security: Defending Australia's Empire', in Deryck M. Schreuder and Stuart Ward (eds), *Australia's Empire*, Oxford History of the British Empire Companion Series, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, pp. 232-258.

[18] Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008.

[19] John Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation: The Making of the Australian Commonwealth*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2000, esp. ch.2.

[20] Bob Birrell, *Federation: The Secret Story*, Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney, pp. 194, 216-17.

[21] Nicholas Lambert, 'Sir John Fisher, the Fleet Unit Concept, and the Creation of the Royal Australian Navy', in David Stevens and John Reeve (eds), *Southern Trident: Strategy, History and the Rise of Australian Naval Power*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest (NSW), 2001, pp. 214-24.

It will already be apparent that the RAN's early history has echoes in AUKUS. In each instance, Australia was responding to a sense of strategic vulnerability with its source in north Asia. When the RAN was formed, fear of Japan was prominent, if often quietly spoken of at a time when the British and Japanese empires had formed an alliance, as they had in 1902. Today, AUKUS is motivated by fear of the People's Republic of China; its Australian advocates sell the agreement as a deterrent to Chinese aggression.[25] In each case, an Asian power is understood as a source of danger. In defining threats to its interests, Australia has clung to its identity as a 'western', 'European' or 'Anglo' democracy in an Asian world.

From 1909 Australia responded to that sense of threat by seeking to contribute to the British Empire's maritime power, creating assets that could be deployed in its own region in the event that the Royal Navy was busy with an enemy elsewhere. It also from this time agreed that in the event of war, control of those assets would pass to the Admiralty; a recognition that it was British sea power in general, and not merely Australia's own share of it, that would provide the country with its ultimate security.[26] Travelling down this path was a more expensive process than Deakin had envisaged when grappling with plans for coastal defence force a few years earlier. Defence expenditure quadrupled from between 1906-7 and 1911-12 to reach four million pounds, with per capita on defence spending approaching that of the United Kingdom itself and exceeded that of Canada, the United States and Germany.[27] Similarly, Australia's recent switch from French-built conventional submarines, announced as a $90 billion contract, to the more ambitious AUKUS program of nuclear-powered submarines represents massive projected spending of hundreds of billions of dollars that, in reality, no one is in a position to estimate accurately. I defer to my colleague Hugh White's opinion that, when the history of Australian defence acquisition is taken into account, much of the program is unlikely to see the light of day.[28] Australia has almost no nuclear industry, for instance. The long timeframe for delivery also suggests another similarity with the early years of the twentieth century. Before it acquired its own navy, Australia had then effectively outsourced its naval defence to Britain. Under the AUKUS arrangements, and considering plans for an expanded capacity to rotate American and British nuclear-powered submarines through Perth, Western Australia, it might be argued that Australia has effectively done much the same thing again, for very many years at any rate. The potentially negative implications of this apparent dependence on Australia's traditional security partners for Australian sovereignty seem obvious enough.

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[22] Fernandes, *Sub-Imperial Power*, pp. 7-8.

[23] Lambert, 'Sir John Fisher, the Fleet Unit Concept, and the Creation of the Royal Australian Navy', p. 223.

[24] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 October 1913, p. 5.

[25] See, for instance, Rory Medcalf, 'How will AUKUS deter threats in the Indo-Pacific?', *Britain's World: The Council on Geostrategy's Online Magazine*, 16 March 2023, https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/britains-world/how-will-aukus-deter-threats-in-the-indo-pacific/

[26] Mordike, *'We should do this thing quietly'*, p. 21.

[27] Birrell, *Federation*, p. 218.

[28] Hugh White, 'The AUKUS submarines will never happen', *The Saturday Paper*, 11-17 March 2023, https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/world/2023/03/15/the-aukus-submarines-will-never-happen

Australian planners' guiding assumption, in 1913 as in 2023, is the fear that, without stringent efforts to bolster traditional alliances, the country would find itself abandoned, isolated and alone.[29] But as I have indicated, AUKUS also reprises an Australian navalism of the early twentieth century, one that found expression in the formation of the RAN in defence of White Australia and wider British imperial interests. That earlier navalism, like AUKUS, had support across the political parties of the day – Labor and Liberal – and it grappled with the balancing of independence within alliance while never being able (or even willing) to escape the implications of dependence on a much larger power. If the modern concept of the Anglosphere underpins AUKUS, we might recognise that it reprises old conceptions of Australia as part of an Anglo-Saxon political community that sometimes included the United States, as in Deakin's vision of 1908 already quoted.[30] The argument here is not so much that AUKUS is nostalgic – although the turn to Britain strikes many as bizarre – but that it reflects continuities in Australian identity that decades of official multiculturalism and Asian engagement have modified without dissolving.[31]

'We do not look upon her as standing for war, but for peace – that peace which comes from being prepared for war', the *Sydney Morning Herald* had said of HMAS *Australia* in October 1913.[32] But within a few months, Australia would indeed be at war and before long, Japanese convoys would be protecting ships full of Australian troops headed for Egypt. That was ultimately the premium Australians paid for their insurance, their protection by the Royal Navy. Even before the war, at the 1911 Imperial Conference, a Labor government had secretly agreed that it would raise an expeditionary force in the event of a European war.[33] The hegemony of a de facto American empire has provided Australia with a similar kind of security since the 1940s, but the US has never called on Australia to pay a premium as heavy as that Australia paid the British Empire in 1915-18. We may now suspect that the deeper integration of Australia into the American alliance implies a much higher insurance premium than Australians have had to pay before. The scenario that inevitably attracts the greatest attention in that context is a future war over Taiwan.[34]

On Saturday 12 April 1924, the HMAS *Australia* was scuttled 24 miles outside Sydney Heads, as a British Empire contribution to the Washington Naval Treaty (1922). 'The sinking provided one of the most deeply impressive scenes in Australian history', according to the *Herald*.[35] That writer did not say whether it was more or less impressive than *Australia*'s appearance between the Heads only a little more than a decade before. HMAS *Australia* would play little direct part in the war, missing the Battle of Jutland due to repairs. Soon after the war, there was a mutiny among its exhausted and demoralised crew. On a more positive note, its presence in the Pacific likely prompted withdrawal of the German fleet to the east in 1914, culminating in the British victory in the Battle of the Falkland Islands.

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[29] For this theme in Australian foreign and security policy, see Allan Gyngell, *Fear of Abandonment: Australia in the World since 1942*, La Trobe University Press in conjunction with Black Inc., Collingwood, 2017

[30] Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain*; Marilyn Lake, 'British world or new world? Anglo-Saxonism and Australian engagement with America', *History Australia*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2013, pp. 36-50.

[31] Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1998.

[32] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 October 1913, p. 5.

[33] Mordike, *'We should do this thing quietly'*, p. 79.

[34] Dunley, 'The end of the "lucky country"?, pp. 5-6.

[35] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 April 1924, p. 10.

Perhaps the money spent on HMAS *Australia* was then worthwhile; perhaps it might have been better used elsewhere. If Australia's fleet of nuclear-powered submarines is ever built, few of us are likely to be in a position to offer a similar judgement on their value, nor to find out if their fate will be any less melancholy than the *Australia*'s.