

Submission to the Inquiry into the Agreement between the Government of Australia, the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the Government of the United States of America for the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information

by Graham Freeman

It is clear that the purpose of the agreement is to enable Australia to purchase nuclear-powered submarines. The information to be exchanged would be of no practical value to Australia without this underlying purpose.

I do not believe that acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines is in Australia's best interests.

In the world wars, submarines were effective against enemy ships. That was more than 75 years ago and the world has changed since then. Missiles are now a much more cost-effective way to deal with enemy shipping now.

I accept that nuclear-powered submarines are much quieter than conventionally powered submarines. However, submarines are offensive weapons, not defensive. They enable offensive operations remote from Australia. I do not understand why we would attempt remote offensive operations. We are not a large nation and there is no way that having a few submarines operating on the other side of the world will ever be of any defensive value for Australia.

Neighbouring countries have expressed dismay at our intent to purchase nuclear-powered submarines, which they see as leading to an arms race. We would be better developing stronger mutual-defence relationships with these neighbours and acting in cooperation with them rather than operating submarines through their waters.

A reason offered for choosing nuclear-powered submarines is their stealth, their quietness of operation. Again, this is a second world war view of these vessels. USA knows the location of all the Russian submarines around the world, and it is likely that other nations do also. Decades ago, Australia knew when a Russian submarine sailed through Torres Strait. While they may be quiet, submarines are still sufficiently easily detectable to greatly limit their usefulness.

The primary aim for other countries with nuclear-powered submarines is as a mobile way of positioning nuclear-armed missiles closer to potential targets. We have been assured by the Australian government that there is no intent to acquire nuclear weapons. If this is indeed true, it is hard to imagine what possible use we would have for the submarines that would justify the enormous expense. They will not be delivered to Australia for decades. We would be better off with land- and ship-based missile systems with which we could defend our territory, and have them available in a considerably shorter time frame.

So, given that the nuclear-powered submarines are very poor value, are offensive rather than defensive, are not consistent with harmonious relations with our neighbours, and have very limited utility without nuclear armaments, I cannot see any value in having an agreement giving us access to privileged information on their propulsion systems.

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