

Australian Defense Minister: AUKUS Subs a Huge Project to 'Pull Off'



The Virginia-class submarine USS Vermont (SSN 792) transits the Thames River while conducting routine operations in 2020. The AUKUS agreement with Australia would provide the country nuclear submarine capability. *U.S. NAVY / Petty Officer 3rd Class Christian Bianchi*

WASHINGTON – The new Australian government said it has no illusions of the immensity of the AUKUS plan to build nuclear-powered submarines and the effort required to make it come to pass.

Last September, Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom announced an agreement – AUKUS – to develop a nuclear-powered submarine capability for Australia.

“It will be a huge national project to pull this off,” said Richard Marples MP, minister of defense and deputy prime minister of Australia, speaking July 11 at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank. Marples was in Washington for a meeting with U.S. Defense secretary Lloyd Austin.

“For a three-ocean nation, the heart of deterrence is undersea capability,” Marples said. “AUKUS will not only make Australia safer, it will make Australia a more potent and capable partner that the United States and the United Kingdom have agreed to work with Australia to meet our needs is not only a game changer, it illustrates why alliances help reinforce, not undermine, our country’s national sovereignty. And I want to recognize the Biden administration and the strong support in Congress for helping bring this agreement to life.

“In determining the optimal pathway forward, the Australian government is acutely aware of the obligations of nuclear stewardship,” he said. “We are focused on the whole enterprise. Safely stewarding sensitive technology, building the workforce and industrial capacity to support the capability, and ensuring that this initiative sets the strongest possible non-proliferation standards.”

Marples said Australia, with Collins-class diesel-electric submarines, faces the challenge of an increasing capability gap.

“How do we get the new capability as soon as possible to minimize any capability gap and then what are we going to do to plug whatever gap exists?” he asked rhetorically.

“To move to operating a nuclear-powered submarine fleet is as big a national challenge, not just in defense, but in terms of really the whole breadth of government that our country has been presented with, almost at every level, not just in terms of developing the capability but building the industrial base, building the regulation, building the government structures around it,” he said, also noting the cost. “We need to work out how we build this into a budget which has a significant debt associated with it.

“At every level there are challenges,” he said. “That said, we mean to meet those challenges. This is a huge national challenge for the country but it’s one we’re going to meet.”