**What bureaucratic processes and structures does AUKUS require?**

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I am speaking here today as a complete outsider to the AUKUS process, but as someone who has had a longstanding professional interest in defence planning and defence cooperation.

Hence, I will give my list of things that I think Australia needs to develop bureaucratic structures, habits, processes and policy guidance for.

Some of these are new, in the sense that Australia has no real experience of its own to draw on.

But few if any are new in the sense that there would not be international precedents and experience to draw on.

If we start with the development and acquisition of SSN AUKUS, bilateral and multilateral cooperation in capability development isn’t all that new for Australia. We bought as partners into a whole host of program from Satellites over Growler to ESSM. We are junior partners in the Mk48 torpedo and Collins AN/BYG-1 Combat system.

Being a partner doesn’t necessarily translate into a meaningful way to influence the development of these systems. But the need to do so is only there if our requirements meaningfully differ from those of the lead nation in the first place.

In that sense, there is no doubt in my mind that our requirements in terms of capability and crewing are more closely aligned with those of the UK than the US SSNX. The British have learned from the problems with the management of the Astute program; and Australia’s participation is now central to the economic and industrial viability of a capability that is essential for their nuclear deterrent.

Overall this does not place us in a bad position. Knowing when our requirements genuinely differ from those of the Brits – which will have to do with climatic and hydrographic factors more than anything else – will need Australia to have deep experience in submarine design that Australian policymakers can trust.

That’s a tall ask, but no different from the French program.

Second, what is different though, is the need to build a national nuclear stewardship system to account for the nuclear reactors on the new vessels.

One might argue that the tolerances for failure are already smaller with conventional submarines than any other capability, and that is true.

But we also have to remember that it took the Coles report for Australia to really recognize and take seriously what it takes to sustain even that capability in industrial and organizational terms.

With reactors, we don’t have the leniency to allow the dysfunctionalities to creek into our submarine sustainment that we saw before Coles, and given that bad things happened if cooling isn’t maintained, or a boat goes out of the vertical, that lack of leniency extends to all parts of the system including physical infrastructure.

The establishment of the ASA to manage the required system draws on lessons from the Collins experience, but more so from that of the US, UK and also French navies on how to manage their nuclear navies.

Yes, there are significant workforce and other challenges involved – but workforce and infrastructure management is actually something that the military is quite good at, if not always efficient.

What will set ASA and Australia’s nuclear stewardship system apart from those of the US and UK though is that it will for a long time remain one that will have close formal and informal integration and cooperation with those of the US and UK.

In part, this reflects the fact that we will rely for many years on our partners’ training and technical expertise as we grow our own.

But it also reflects the reality that our failure to build robust stewardship expertise and mess up with one of our boats would have severe consequences for the domestic and international political and public licence of the UK and US navies to operate their own nuclear vessels.

If the US and UK are not confident that we know what we are doing, they will not give us a reactor. This is something important to keep in mind when thinking about the much-discussed political understandings that underpin AUKUS beyond the various commercial and legal arrangements now being put in place.

I for one don’t think that’s necessarily a bad thing, even if it does mean that the corridors of Russell, Osbourne or Henderson will be populated by former US or UK admirals in ways that we didn’t see much since the 1950s. And it’s probably fair to say that our Navy was a lot better run in those days.

A crucial element of this confidence will rest on the new Australian Nuclear-Powered Submarine Safety Regulator. We currently do not have a regulator able to certify pressurized water reactors in Australia. Creating one that is reporting to the Minister for Defence aligns with the practice of all the other Western nuclear navies and Brazil, and the decision to create a separate entity rather than try to emulate the self-regulating culture of the US Office of Naval Reactors was an important and right decision in my view.

Establishing the right expertise, regulatory culture and processes for that regulator will be more important for the long-term success of AUKUS than anything else – failures elsewhere will just cost money and time, but failures of the regulator would crash domestic and international confidence that is the foundation of the program.

And given the US and UK have different approaches to this, we will likely have to run two parallel regimes for Virginias and AUKUS submarines.

Third, moving beyond capability acquisition, the optimum pathway that will see US and UK boats, including with mixed crewing, operate from Stirling poses some additional and new challenges.

Generally, host nations tend to have more ability and arrangements to withhold consent for other countries’ air operations from their territory than for the operation of naval forces, which reflects practical as well as legal reasons. There will need to be undertakings and arrangements about water space management and surveillance that can build on procedures already in place between western allies, but given we are only dealing with SSN no such close and constant cooperation as for example exists between the US and Canada in joint clearing the approaches for US SSBN to Bangor.

Hence, the mixed crewing part is in my view going to be the most interesting part to watch. Australia has remarkably little experience with mixed crewing or multinational units. Canberra lore has it that the embedding of HMAS Sydney in the US 7th fleet in 2013 kind of bypassed the political level – and it was neither as systematically embedded as European vessels regularly are, nor ever repeated.

The Canberra policy instinct to look to ‘Full Knowledge and Concurrence’ on such issues, which is quite evident from the Ministerial Statements on the Force Posture Initiative since 2012, is also not really all that helpful in this regard.

Here, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of having the UK at the table. The UK are far from naïve on these issues, going back to Suez, the Multilateral Nuclear Force and more recently the Libya experience.

But they do have a lot of experience on political-military arrangements for joint crewing arrangements that we do not, from a range of contexts including the joint UK-German amphibious bridging battalion, NATO multinational aircraft, and not least in the 2012 US-UK carrier cooperation agreement that was in place for more than 10 years, and regularly saw British planes as integral parts of US flattops, and vice versa. This latter agreement I understand took many months of negotiations to get the political-military arrangements in place.

It will be interesting to see what specific approach the three partners will take to address the issues that arise from mixed crewing for the rotational presence in Stirling.

Finally, it is worth remembering that Pillar II of AUKUS also requires quite significant new arrangements. A few brief observations:

I think that the AUKUS countries have tied themselves into knots by lumping both pillars together under the same label because it has made sensible expansion of that cooperation to other countries more difficult.

I would expect that we might see a refinement that AUKUS refers to trilateral cooperation based on the coordinated expert control legislation, but parallel and technology specific cooperation frameworks that can include other countries, so we can get away from JAUKUS, CAUCUS, NZAUKUS and so on.

The Advanced Strategic Capabilities Accelerator is probably something we’d have done even without AUKUS, but AUKUS has introduced a certain tension between the desire for speed and collaboration with the aim for sovereign industrial capability in regards to Pillar II.

Defence understanding of industrial capacity and capability is crucial to make those judgments, which is again something that it’s not very good at, so if we want to see capability, working with the US and UK isn’t such a bad thing in this context either.

Finally, a common thread across Pillar I and II is the need for close integration of technical - scientific, acquisition, industry policy and capability management.

In Australia, these are nowadays so diffused between CASG, Service chiefs, DepSec Strategy, Head of Personnel, and DSTG, which only meet at the highest level of the organization.

Compared to other countries, that is an extremely diffused set of authorities – in particular, Australia is unusual that DSTG, industry policy and acquisition are not part of a capability organization.

In that sense, the establishment of ASCA and, in particular, the ASA, are reflections that our established defence architecture couldn’t achieve the aims of AUKUS .

Their creation outside of and separate to the regular structures is also an indictment of the state of the defence organization as a whole.

Bottom line: No particular aspect of implementing AUKUS is all that difficult on its own.

In isolation, each part of the bureaucratic elements that I discussed here is, in my view and from the outside, progressing as needed.

But collectively it requires an acuity, pace and scale of change from a defence organization that has traditionally struggled to deliver on much lesser reforms.

If I would worry about bureaucratic demands and inadequacies, it is the non-AUKUS part of Defence that I think we need to worry about.