

Aukusing for War: The Real Target Is China

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The occasional burst of candour from US diplomats provides a striking, air clearing difference to their Australian and British counterparts. Official statements about the AUKUS security pact between Washington, London and Canberra, rarely mention the target in so many words, except on the gossiping fringes. Commentators and think tankers are essentially given free rein to speculate, masticating over such streaky and light terms as "new strategic environment", "great power competition", "rules-based order".

On the occasion of his [April 3 visit](#) to Washington's Center for a New American Security (CNAS), US **Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell** was refreshingly frank. His presence as an emissary of US power in the Pacific has been notable since the AUKUS announcement in September 2021.

In March last year, Campbell, as Deputy Assistant to the US President and Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific National Security Council, was unfurling the US flag before various Pacific states, adamant that US policy was being reoriented from one of neglect to one of greater attentiveness. The Solomon Islands, given its newly minted security pact with Beijing, was of particular concern.

"We realise that we have to overcome in certain areas some amounts of distrust and uncertainty about follow through," he [explained](#) to reporters in Wellington, New Zealand. "We're seeking to gain that trust and confidence as we go forward."

In Honiara, Campbell [conceded](#) that the US had not done "enough before" and had to be "big enough to admit that we need to do more, and we need to do better." This entailed, in no small part, cornering the Solomon Islands Premier Manasseh Sogavare into affirming that Beijing would not be permitted to establish a military facility capable of supporting "power projection capabilities".

In his discussion with the CNAS Chief Executive Officer, Richard Fontaine, Campbell did the usual runup, doffing the cap to the stock principles. Banal generalities were discussed, for instance, as to whether the US should be the sole show in projecting power or seek support from like-minded sorts.

“I would argue that as the United States and other nations confront a challenging security environment, that the best way to maintain peace and security is to work constructively and deeply with allies and partners.” A less than stealthy rebuke was reserved for those who think “that the best that the United States can do is to act alone and to husband its resources and think about unilateral, individual steps it might take.”

The latter view has always been scorned by those calling themselves multilateralists, a cloaking term for waging war arm-in-arm with satellite states and vassals while ascribing to it peace keeping purposes in the name of stability. Campbell is unsurprising in arguing “that working closely with other nations, not just diplomatically, but in *defensive avenues* [emphasis added], has the consequence of strengthening peace and stability more generally.” The virtue with the unilateralists is the possibility that war should be resorted to sparingly. If one is taking up arms alone, a sense of caution can moderate the bloodlust.

Campbell revealingly envisages “a number of areas of conflict and in a number of scenarios that countries acting together” in the Indo-Pacific, including Japan, Australia, South Korea and India. “I think that balance, the additional capacity will help strengthen deterrence more general [*sic*].” The candid admission on the role played by the AUKUS submarines follows, with the boats having “the potential to have submarines from a number of countries operating in close coordination that could deliver conventional ordinance from long distances. Those have enormous implications in a variety of scenarios, including in cross-strait circumstances”. And so, we have the prospect of submarines associated with the AUKUS compact being engaged in a potential war with China over Taiwan.

When asked on what to do about the slow production rate of submarines on the part of the US Navy necessary to keep AUKUS afloat, Campbell acknowledged the constraints – the Covid pandemic, supply chain issues, the number of submarines in dry dock requiring or requiring servicing. But like Don Quixote taking the reins of Rosinante to charge the windmills, he is undeterred in his optimism, insisting that “the urgent security demands in Europe and the Indo-Pacific require much more rapid ability to deliver both ordinance and other capabilities.”

To do so, the military industrial complex needs to be broadened (good news for the defence industry, terrible for the peacemakers). “I think probably there is going to be a need over time for a larger number of vendors, both in the United States in Australia and Great Britain, involved in both AUKUS and other endeavours.”

There was also little by way of peace talk in Campbell’s confidence about the April 11 trilateral Washington summit between the US, Japan and the Philippines, following a bilateral summit to be held between **President Joe Biden** and Japan’s **Prime Minister Fumio Kishida**. When terms such as “modernize” and “update” are bandied about in the context of an alliance, notably with an eye towards a rival power’s ambitions, the warring instincts must surely be stirred. In the language of true encirclement, Campbell envisages a cooperative framework that will “help link the Indo-Pacific more effectively to Europe” while underscoring “our commitment to the region as a whole.”

A remarkably perverse reality is in the offing regarding AUKUS. In terms of submarines, it will lag, possibly even sink, leaving the US and, to a lesser extent the UK, operating their fleets as Australians foot the bill and provide the refreshments. Campbell may well mention Australia and the UK in the context of nuclear-powered submarines, but it remains clear where his focus is: the US program “which I would regard as the jewel in the crown of our defense industrial capacity.” Not only is Australia effectively promising to finance and service that particular capacity, it will also do so in the service of a potentially catastrophic conflict which will see its automatic commitment. A truly high price to pay for an abdication of sovereignty for the fiction of regional stability.

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