Australia's Naval Modernization and its Impact on Future Indo-Pacific Balance of Power

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Abstract

The research article examines the naval force modernization and strategic implications of Australia's rapidly expanding naval capabilities on Indo-Pacific power dynamics. The objective of the research is to use theoretical lens of Balance of Power, article has evaluated how Canberra is expanding its power by enhancing military capabilities and by augmenting alliances with major powers. While QUAD showcases multilateral co-operative arrangement between U.S., Australia, Japan, and India, it is AUKUS which is expected to impart major influence on future Indo-Pacific. With acquisition of nuclear attack submarines and development of advance naval combat capabilities, Canberra's ability to project power across the Indo-Pacific is set to increase substantially. This modernization marks a shift from a predominantly defensive maritime posture toward a more assertive role. The article has provided overview of Australia's current naval capabilities and has explored its naval modernization programs in all domain of naval warfare. It also analyses the broader geopolitical ramifications of Australia's growing naval strength, particularly in relation to AUKUS, within the Indo-Pacific region.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific Region, Naval Force Modernization, AUKUS, QUAD, Nuclear Attack Submarines (SSN), Balance of Power

Introduction

Located at Southern hemisphere between Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean, Australia is the sixth largest country with coastline stretching nearly 60,000 kilo-meters. The country's northern region is close to Southeast Asia while its eastern and western regions open to the Pacific and Indian Oceans, respectively, giving Australia a dual-oceanic connectivity. Its geographical isolation, vast coastline, and strategic location make it a critical player in regional geopolitics. To its north, Australia is separated from Asia by the Timor and Arafura Seas, while the Coral Sea lies to its northeast. To the west, the Indian Ocean offers Australia direct access to major maritime trade routes connecting the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. The Pacific Ocean, which forms its eastern boundary, connects Australia to major trading partners like the U.S., China, Japan, and Southeast Asian nations (Kapetas, 2021).

Australia's defense posture has evolved significantly over the decades, shaped

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by its unique geographical isolation and its reliance on strong alliances, most notably with the United States. Historically, Australia's naval force was built around the need for homeland defense and regional peacekeeping missions. Throughout much of the 20th century, Australia operated a relatively modest naval fleet, emphasizing smaller, conventionally-powered vessels designed primarily for coastal defense and anti-submarine warfare. However, the growing China's influence in Indo Pacific, along with its rapid naval modernization, has raised concerns in Canberra. In response, Australia is gradually expanding its naval capabilities, but the overarching defense posture has remained largely defensive in nature (Brown, 2020). The signing of the AUKUS pact, however, represents a fundamental departure from this historical posture.

The 2021 announcement of the AUKUS trilateral security pact between Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom marked a pivotal moment in the strategic recalibration of Australia's defense posture. As part of the agreement, Australia committed to acquiring nuclear-powered submarines, propelling its naval capabilities into a new era and signaling its intent to play a more active role in regional security. In a world where geopolitical tensions are escalating in the Indo-Pacific, AUKUS is designed to counter the growing influence of China and ensure that key maritime routes remain free and open. As Australia shifts from a primarily defensive to a more assertive posture, AUKUS is poised to reshape both its naval capabilities and the broader security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific for decades to come.

This research article has provided an overview of Australia's current naval capabilities and how Royal Australian Navy (RAN) is undertaking comprehensive force modernization in all domains of naval warfare. These modernization efforts encompass force expansion as well as procurement of advance offensive systems to allow RAN project power at extended ranges for long duration of time. The dual approach being followed by Canberra to enhance its military prowess in response of China's rapid rise as economic and military power has been validated by theoretical lens of Balance of Power. The article has utilized data collected from official reports, books, research articles, online analytical papers, and Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) to craft a refined picture of Australia's future naval ambitions. In addition, the impact of Australia's naval modernization on future geopolitical dynamics of Indo-Pacific has been analyzed.

Overview from the Lens of Balance of Power Theory

When viewed from Balance of Power theory, Australia's ongoing naval modernization will have major impact on the strategic environment of Indo-Pacific region. Balance of Power theory, rooted in realist school of thought, argues that states seek to prevent any single power from dominating the international system. To do so, states either augment their own military capacity or formulate alliances with states of shared interests to counter potential threats and sustain the power equilibrium (Nexon, 2009). Australia's naval modernization, particularly from perspective of AUKUS

trilateral security arrangement, validate this theoretical framework as Washington together with Canberra, seeks to respond to the shifting power dynamics due to rapid rise of China as economic as well as military power (Kimar, 2023).

Australia is following both approaches simultaneously as underscored by Balance of Power theory. Besides naval modernization efforts, Canberra is also developing strategic alliances with major powers. Quad and AUKUS underscores Canberra's growing relations with other like-minded powers which includes United States, Japan, United Kingdom, and India. The provision of nuclear attack submarines (SSNs) and advance military capabilities, from balance of power perspective, will allow Australia to counterbalance China's growing naval prowess. From broader U.S strategy of offshoring balance, AUKUS represents Washington's confidence towards Canberra as frontline allay. This will allow Washington to effective counterbalance China without over stretching its own resources in order to ensure regional order stability as favorable to Western interests. However, naval modernization in the Indo-Pacific is not a risk free endeavor either. As balance of power theory states, increasing military potential can yield security dilemmas, where states perceive each other's defensive measures as threats, leading to arms race and eventually causing strategic instability. Australia's naval buildup, while aimed at deterring Chinese aggression, could be interpreted by Beijing as an aggressive move, prompting further militarization of the Indo-Pacific region (Türkcan, 2022).

Royal Australian Navy (RAN) Current Strength

Royal Australian Navy (RAN) is responsible for safeguarding Australia's maritime interests at regional scale. Historically, Australia has formulated alliances with leading maritime power to safeguard its extended maritime connectivity with rest of world. Being a member of Quad, RAN has been participating in joint naval exercises with United States, Japan, and India. But traditionally, RAN has remained a defensive force with limited offensive capabilities. However, now its combat posture is gradually shifting with the development of offensive naval capabilities. AUKUS, a trilateral strategic agreement signed between Australia, United Kingdom, and United States on September 15, 2022, has placed Canberra at a pivotal position to counter rapid expansion of China in Indo-Pacific (House, 2021).

The major surface combatants of current RAN are three Hobart class destroyers and eight Anzac class frigates. The Hobart-class destroyers are top tier warships of RAN and were commissioned between 2017 and 2020. Displacing approximately 7200 tons at full load, these modern ships feature advanced radar arrays including U.S.-made Aegis combat management system. These destroyers are equipped with 48-cell Mark 41 vertical launch system (VLS) for supporting surface-to-air missiles and are primarily tasked with air-defense duties. In parallel, eight Harpoon anti-ship missiles and MU-90 torpedoes provide surface warfare and anti-submarine capability respectively (Hobart class Guided Missile Destroyer (DDGH), 2024)

Anzac-class frigates, based on the German MEKO design, are second tier surface warships of RAN and were commissioned between 1996 and 2006. Displacing around 3600 tons, these frigates are primarily designed for anti-submarine warfare (ASW). In addition, eight Harpoon anti-ship missiles, and 8-cell Mark 41 VLS equipped with ESSMs provide decent surface and air-defense capability. These warships were acquired between 1996 and 2006 and have been periodically modernized. But considering their small size and limited range, these warships are getting inadequate to full-fill Australia's future threat perceptions and are thus entering into retirement phase (Anzac Class Frigates FFG, 2024).

Two Canberra class landing helicopter docks (LHDs) constitute the core of amphibious war fighting capability. Defensive airborne anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capability is provided by MH-60 Seahawk helicopters. Long range air borne anti-submarine warfare (ASW), and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capability are granted by P-8A Poseidon MPAs operated by Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) (Giegerich, 2024). These assets provide decent air-support capability to RAN.

The underwater arm of RAN consists of six Collin class diesel electric submarines (SSKs). These submarines, after receiving necessary modifications, will remain in service for another decade. However, these submarines are considered suitable for defensive operation in territorial waters and lack the capability to operate in open oceans for extended period. In total, RAN has 41 commissioned combat vessels of all categories and is pre-dominantly a defensive force. (Giegerich, 2024)

Royal Australian Navy (RAN) Modernization Efforts

Australia is periodically increasing its defense spending. In 2024, its defense budget stood at $37 billion, showcasing 6.3% increment compared with last year (Arthur, 2024). Initially, Australia committed additional $190 billion for defense for decade 2020-2030, (McGuirk, 2020) suggesting 2.3% increment in share of national economy. (Hurst, 2023). However, revised figures under the new National Defence Strategy and Integrated Investment Plan suggest that $718 billion will be spent on defense by 2033 (Uren, 2024). Australia's defense spending is expected to reach $100 billion per year by 2033-34, surpassing 2.3% of national GDP (Blenkin, 2024). A major portion of this budgetary increment will be directed towards modernizing naval forces.

Australia's decision to expand Royal Australian Navy (RAN), particularly its surface combatant force and underwater fleet, is driven by a strategic imperative to enhance its naval prowess to better align Canberra's interests in the face of a shifting geopolitical landscape. This expansion is significant, both in terms of the size and tonnage of the future fleet. Beside expansion of RAN, modernization of Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) with superior aircrafts, weapon package, and support assets will further augment Australia's defensive capabilities in the maritime domain.

According to Defense Strategic Review, RAN will commission nine Tier 1 warships and 11 Tier-2 warships. Previously, 12 Tier 1 surface combatants were planned. Three Hobart class destroyers and six Hunter class frigates have been classified as Tier 1 warships while 11 general purpose frigates will falls in category of Tier 2 warships. Currently, Australia is developing long range strike capabilities by procuring sea and air based cruise missiles. RAN is acquiring ship borne Tomahawk cruise missiles which will be carried by Hobart class destroyers (Trevithick, 2021).

RAN future combat fleet will be based on six new Hunter-class heavy frigates. Based on British Type-26 frigate design, these multirole warships will offer significant enhancement in terms of range and combat capability. The first Hunter-class vessel is under construction (Manuel, 2024) with the first ship expected to enter service in 2032 (Hunter Class Frigate, 2024). Six frigates will be constructed in two batches of three ships each. Displacing 8,200 tons each, these frigates will feature advanced Australian-developed CEA phased array radar systems, as well as the Aegis combat management system. They will be equipped with a range of sensors, including hull-mounted sonar and towed array sonar, and advance defensive countermeasures. Warship will have capacity to support one MH-60R Romeo ASW helicopter and an un-crewed system (BAE, 2024). These warships will also have 32 cell Mark-41 VLS to carry surface to air missiles as well as Tomahawk cruise missiles. The second batch of three Hunter frigates may feature up to 96 vertical launch missile cells and sixteen cruise missile canisters for Naval Strike Missile (NSMs), making them formidable assets in any naval engagement (Felton, 2023). The equipping of Tomahawk cruise missile suggests that all major warships of RAN will possess the capability to engage surface targets from long ranges with high precision.

In addition to the Hunter-class frigates, Australia plans to acquire a new class of frigates, referred as Project Sea 3000, focused specifically on anti-submarine warfare. This future class of frigates will likely be a foreign design, with candidates including the German MEKO A200, the South Korean Daegu class frigate, the Spanish F110, and the Japanese Mogami-class frigate. Australia plans to directly purchase three from one of these foreign suppliers, with an additional eight to be built domestically under transfer of technology agreement. The commissioning of these frigates shall double the net-size of Australian surface combat fleet (Felton, 2024).

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of Australia's naval modernization is the development of unmanned systems and optionally manned combat ships. These vessels can operate with or without a crew, allowing them to undertake dangerous missions without risking human lives (Grady, 2024). While the exact specifications of these ships are not yet known, they are expected to be equipped with Mark-41 VLS and Aegis combat management system which will grant multi-domain strike capabilities. Australia's decision to partner with the U.S. Navy on this project means it will benefit from American advancements in unmanned naval technology. The U.S. Navy's Large Unmanned Surface Vehicle (LUSV) program offers insights into what

these Australian ships might look like. The LUSV is designed to be 60-90 meters long, displace 1,000-2,000 tons, and carry up to 32 vertical launch missile cells. This aligns with Australia's requirement for a robust, corvette-sized vessel capable of performing a range of combat roles. (Ferguson, 2024)

In parallel, Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) is also purchasing AGM-158B JASSM-ER cruise missiles for its multi-role fighter aircrafts (Hughes, 2022). Both these long-range cruise missiles will significantly extend the strike envelop of Australian force. This range and precision increment of fighter aircrafts, when coupled with P-8 Poseidon MPA will significantly improve strike envelop of Australia in naval domain. RAAF is also in the phase of inducting 72 F-35A Lightening-II stealth aircrafts (Hurst, 2021). These stealth aircraft are replacing older aircraft. Though these aircrafts will be operated by air forces, but their deployment in maritime domain can significantly augment air defense envelop for safe operations of other tiers of naval forces.

AUKUS and Australia's Nuclear Submarines' Ambitions

The most eminent and widely discussed dimension of Australia's naval modernization is the acquisition of eight nuclear attack submarines (SSNs) in a deal worth $368 billion under the framework of AUKUS (Greene, 2023). Nuclear submarines can remain submerged for months, travel faster, and cover greater distances than their conventional counterparts. These submarines will be based on Royal Navy's next generation SSN-R project and will be called SSN-AUKUS (Office, 2023).

SSNs will be integrated into RAS with a periodic approach. Initially, RAN personnel will collaborate with counterparts from the United States and the United Kingdom to undergo joint crew training regarding new technology. Subsequently, starting in 2027, SSNs from the United States Navy (USN) and Royal Navy (RN) will undertake rotational visits to Australia for developing RAN familiarity with maintenance and the operational use of SSNs. From 20230 onwards, as a stop gap measure, the United States will lease three – with option of two more – secondhand Virginia-class SSNs to the RAN. Finally, in the early 2040s, the first SSN-AUKUS produced at an Australian shipyard will be delivered to the RAN for active deployment (Doherty, 2023).

The advanced endurance and stealth capabilities of nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) will greatly extend the operational reach of the RAN. Transitioning from a primarily defensive force focused on sea-denial, the RAN will now have the capacity for sustained power projection in the Western Pacific, particularly in the South China Sea. For the U.S. and its allies, maintaining a forward, continuous naval presence and extending their reach in the Indo-Pacific is critical to counter Beijing's expanding naval influence. In addition to SSNs, Washington is also exploring deeper collaboration with Canberra in areas such as artificial intelligence,

cyber and quantum technologies, hypersonic missile systems, and enhanced undersea capabilities. These advancements aim to create synergy between U.S. and Australian forces, reinforcing the collective combat posture in the Indo-Pacific theatre. (Ibrahim, 2023)

To compensate the time gap, Australia is also planning to give life-extension upgrade to its existing Collin class submarines (Vavasseur, 2021). The upgrade will also involve modifications in weapon packages to support sub-launched tomahawk cruise missiles. The feasibility of such an extensive upgrade, however, is still underway (Felton, 2022). These modifications, provided it will happen, will allow RAN to employ Collins for offensive roles as a stop gap measures till the arrival of nuclear attack submarines.

Since its announcement, AUKUS has faced criticism from various parts of the international community. China and Russia have repeatedly voiced their concerns, labeling AUKUS as an irresponsible move that could destabilize the region, fuel an arms race, and undermine global non-proliferation efforts (TASS, 2024). Additionally, nuclear disarmament watchdogs have raised alarms over the potential access of Non-Nuclear Weapon States (NNWS) to advanced nuclear technologies. In response, Washington has sought to alleviate these concerns by ensuring that Australia will not have direct access to the nuclear reactors within the SSNs. The reactors for the SSN-AUKUS vessels will not be constructed in Australia but will be imported from the U.S. or UK as sealed units, requiring no refueling throughout their operational lifespan (Probyn, 2023). Additionally, Australia's SSNs will be equipped with conventional weapons only and therefore will not play any part in proliferation of nuclear weaponization of Indo-Pacific region (Doherty, 2023). This suggests, although Washington, London, and Canberra have exploited the loopholes in Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) (Borger, 2023), but necessary safeguards have been undertaken to keep AUKUS free from nuclear weaponization axis.

A tabular comparison of Australia's major naval combatants equipped with long range guided weapon systems is given below. The comparison takes into account the current strength of RAN and expected strength of RAN in 2040s. (Giegerich, 2024)

Table 1: *Australia's major naval combatants weapon systems*

Type of Warship	Current RAN Strength	Future RAN Strength
Multi Mission Destroyers (DDGs)	03x Hobart class DDGs	03x Hobart class DDGs
Heavy Frigates (FFG)	N/A	06x Hunter class FFGs
Light Frigates (FFL)	11x Anzac class FFLs	11x Project Sea 3000s

Large Optionally Crewed Surface Vessels (LOSVs)	N/A	06x LOSVs
Conventional Submarines (SSK)	06x Collin class SSKs	N/A
Nuclear Attack Submarines SSN/SSGN)	N/A	08x AUKUS-SSNs
Total Strength	**20**	**34**

Impact on Indo-Pacific Region

Australia's rapid naval modernization, particularly through initiatives like the AUKUS agreement, will have a profound impact on the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. In brief, five key takeaways can be highlighted.

First, these modernizations will significantly shift the balance of power by enhancing Australia's ability to operate in contested areas like the South China Sea and Western Pacific (particularly within first island chain), areas that are critical to Chinese maritime interests. The deployment of nuclear-powered submarines will give Australia an upper hand in maintaining a stealthy, prolonged presence in these waters, extending its strategic reach and complicating China's military planning. This development is likely to be viewed as a direct challenge to Beijing's growing influence in the region, and could provoke further militarization, leading to traditional security dilemma where one nation's efforts to enhance its security triggers counter-balancing measures from rival states, particularly China. To nullify RAN's growing naval potential, PLAN may undertake forward deployment of its own nuclear attack submarines, warships, and carrier-strike groups which will dilute the security environment of ASEAN region and may open unnecessary battlefront in case of crisis.

Second, Australia's enhanced naval capabilities, backed by the U.S. and the U.K. through AUKUS, will strengthen the collective deterrence posture of Western allies in the Indo-Pacific. This creates a formidable counterweight to China's expanding naval power and its assertive behavior in regional waters, thereby contributing to a more multipolar balance. While U.S.-China competition has long been the defining feature of Indo-Pacific dynamics, Australia's modernization could accelerate the emergence of a broader coalition of balancing powers, including Japan, India, and other ASEAN countries, seeking to contain China's rise. This may compel Beijing to formulate similar strategic arrangements to counterbalance AUKUS or even Quad. Such approach will have far reaching ramification as far as destabilization of global balance of power is concerned.

Third, these modernization efforts will intensify the arms race in the region, prompting neighboring countries, especially those wary of both China's and Australia's expanding military capabilities, to bolster their own naval and maritime forces. This is particularly relevant to Southeast Asian nations, which may feel

compelled to strengthen their maritime defenses to avoid being left vulnerable in the midst of growing great power competition. Nations like India can exploit such opportunities to support its hegemonic designs in Indian Ocean Region, compelling Pakistan to undertake stabilizing measures. This one example showcases how rapid build-up at one place impacts the strategic stability at extra regional scale. In this sense, Australia's modernization could introduce both stability and instability: stability through a stronger deterrent against potential Chinese aggression, but instability by fueling an arms race that escalates regional tensions and may cause political instability.

Fourth, besides the risks of regional nuclear proliferation, AUKUS could encourage other nations to pursue nuclear technologies by exploiting weaknesses in existing non-proliferation regimes. For instance, India, as a member of the Quad and a party to several bilateral security agreements with the U.S., has long sought deeper engagement in Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. Although India was excluded from AUKUS, New Delhi has nonetheless welcomed the agreement as it aligns with its anti-China stance. Using AUKUS as a precedent, India may seek to acquire similar nuclear propulsion technology from foreign sources, most likely France, for its Project 75-A nuclear attack submarine (SSN) program. Given the existing strong ties between France and India in submarine development, the possibility of Indo-French cooperation in this domain cannot be ruled out. Similarly, this can open new mods of bilateral and multi-lateral co-operation as far as nuclear propulsion technologies and even nuclear attack submarines is concerned. The proliferation of SSNs, even if not equipped with nuclear armaments, will pose risks of major crisis in the form of command & control complications, safety of nuclear assets, and risks of nuclear accidents. It's worth mentioning that such measures will weaken the credibility of nuclear non-proliferation regimes even further.

In sum, Australia's rapid naval modernization will play a key role in shaping the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. By enhancing its strategic depth and operational reach, Australia will be better equipped to contribute to regional security, particularly in containing Chinese maritime expansion. However, these developments will also trigger competitive responses from both regional powers and middle states, leading to a more complex and potentially volatile security environment in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

Australia's naval modernization represents a strategic effort by Canberra to maintain a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. By building larger and more technologically capable naval force, Australia seeks to counterbalance China's rapid expansion of naval might. Additionally, Canberra is actively working with United States to consolidate regional alliances with other major powers to effectively contain Beijing's growing influence. Australia's force modernization programs – particularly under the ambit of AUKUS, indicates that Australia is gradually transforming its hard

power in the maritime domain from defensive to offensive posture which synchronizes with the political aptitude of Canberra. Through the lens of balance of power theory, this force modernization and alliance formation is a rational response to the changing power dynamics in Indo-Pacific, directed to prevent China from achieving hegemonic dominance in the Indo-Pacific. However, AUKUS also underscores the fact that China's growing military power has forced the U.S. to take extraordinary steps to maintain its strategic dominance. Australia, despite being a distant nation, has been drawn into China-U.S. geopolitical rivalry. The precedent set by AUKUS may inspire other nations to follow suit, and under current global circumstances, competing powers are likely to explore more assertive military options. As a result, the Indo-Pacific region could emerge as the primary battleground in a new Cold War-like competition. Thus, the risks of intensification of security dilemmas and ignition of arms races can potentially escalate tensions and undermine regional stability.

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