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NAVAL WARFARE

## As AUKUS looms, US Navy sub leaders sound alarms at home

"We are in our most dangerous decade right now with the geopolitical threats we face," said Vice Adm. Bill Houston, commander of submarine forces.

By **JUSTIN KATZ** on November 04, 2022 at 9:45 AM



The attack submarine USS Virginia (SSN 774) arrives at Portsmouth Naval Shipyard for an extended drydock selective restrictive availability. (US Navy)

WASHINGTON — The US Navy's top submariners gathered this week just minutes away from the Pentagon and with increasing levels of urgency, conveyed a similar and at times ominous message: The need for the silent service to "get real, get better" is both immediate and imperative.

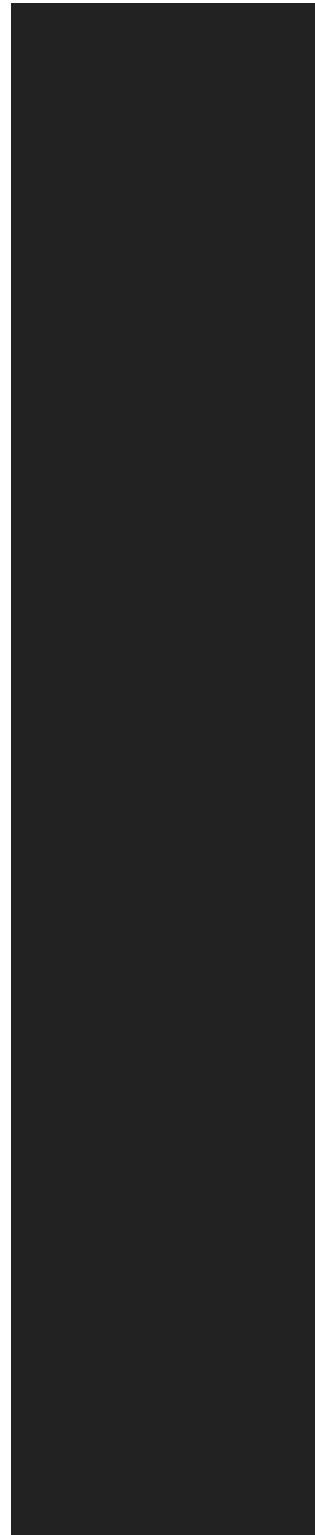
"We are in our most dangerous decade right now with the geopolitical threats we face," said Vice Adm. Bill Houston, commander of submarine forces. The Navy has significantly increased the physical size of the submarines it is building in the past decade, but "we're doing this with an industrial base that has actually shrunk."

During this year's [Naval Submarine League annual symposium](#), nearly every admiral who addressed attendees echoed Houston's message, sounding the alarm about the increasing possibility of a major confrontation within this decade and warning that there are many issues — operational and acquisition, uniformed and industrial — that require urgent attention.

It was a strikingly different tone than previous years at the relatively niche Washington, DC, military exposition that, while small when compared to its contemporaries, is unique in its ability to routinely command the attention of all the [US Navy's top submariners](#).

For example, the submarine force's high demand around the world from the combatant commanders has always been a point of pride for service brass, but was muted this year by the need to improve training to avoid incidents like that of the [Connecticut \(SSN-22\)](#). Similarly, any excitement for the long awaited Columbia-class, which saw its [first keel laying](#) earlier this year, was accompanied by reminders of how much work is left to be done to relieve the maintenance backlog.

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And in the backdrop this year was the forthcoming advancement of the [trilateral security pact](#) announced by the United States, United Kingdom and Australia last year, dubbed AUKUS. That deal, which involves the two former countries sharing highly classified nuclear submarine technology with the latter, is expected to move forward in March 2023 when an 18-month consultation and planning process ends.

Adm. Frank Caldwell, the director of naval reactors, said he and his colleagues have met numerous times with British and Australian counterparts and are in the process of consolidating their final recommendations that are due next year. As the naval reactors chief, he leads the Navy agency charged with maintaining and advancing the service's nuclear propulsion capabilities, which puts him squarely in the middle of the trilateral discussions.



President Joe Biden on Sept. 15, 2021, announced a new national security initiative in partnership with then-Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison (L) and United Kingdom Prime Minister Boris Johnson (R). (Win McNamee/Getty Images)

He declined to speak in detail about his work thus far, citing the need not to get ahead of any White House decisions, but he did stress the significance of the choice to share the nation's coveted secrets with any ally.

"For perspective, we've only shared our technology with one other country and that's the United Kingdom," he said on Tuesday.

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The enormity of that decision and the work ahead for the United States to help Australia lay the foundation for its future nuclear submarine force magnified the clear problems the US is having at home, laid out by each admiral who followed Caldwell.

"Does the Navy conclude that there is adequate submarine construction and submarine depot repair capacity to support the future defense plan?" Rear Adm. Doug Perry, director of undersea warfare requirements, said while reading an audience question.

"No," he remarked after a moment of hesitation, drawing laughs from the crowd. "That's our challenge. But we recognize the challenge and there [are] massive amounts of studies with real data that's identifying what the challenges are."

Following his remarks, Perry sought to clarify his response, adding that although the capacity problems exist today, the Navy has numerous efforts underway to address the issue moving forward, such as its [20-year plan](#) to revamp and modernize the four public shipyards.

Rear Adm. Jonathan Rucker, the program executive officer for attack submarines, was equally blunt in recognizing the issues at hand. He noted that on average 30 percent of the maintenance work done on any given Navy submarine when it comes into a shipyard is unplanned work. For comparison, commercial industry aims for no more than 10 percent unplanned work when maintaining its vessels, he added.

"The reason we're not there is we're not following our own requirements," said Rucker, adding the Navy's goal is to be at 10 percent by 2026. "We're not sticking to our milestones in the planning process. We're not being real with how we modernize them."

The reference to being "real" alludes to a campaign initiated by [Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday](#), who has taken up a motto of "get real, get better," a short and simple call to action for the service to improve itself in everything it does.



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Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael M. Gilday speaks at a Pentagon press briefing, Washington, D.C., April 2, 2020. (DoD photo by Lisa Ferdinando)

“If you look at where we are today... I’ll be real about this as well: Of the 50 attack submarines we have, 18 of them are either in maintenance or waiting to go in maintenance,” Rucker said. “We should be at 10 [submarines]. Our goal is 20 percent.”

Vice Adm. Johnny Wolfe, who leads the Strategic Systems Program office, which focuses on both the nuclear and [hypersonic weapons](#) that will be carried by the submarine force, called out the large bills facing the government’s infrastructure, such as the Navy’s part in the recapitalization for [nuclear command, control and communications](#). (Also dubbed NC3, that system is the means for the president to exercise their authority over the country’s nuclear capabilities.)

“And that’s just on the government side.... Industry has an infrastructure challenge because, quite frankly, we haven’t invested a lot as we’ve been in this sustainment mode,” he said. “It’s great that we’ve got funded systems, it’s great that we’ve got support, but if we don’t get the people and the infrastructure to actually do all of that – we’re going to find ourselves caught in [a] dilemma.”

He added that he has established a group at his office to build a “roadmap” designed to lay out what projects will be necessary in which years to ensure the weapon systems coming online will have the necessary support in place.

### The AUKUS Question

How any of these issues end up impacting the United States’ ability to assist Australia in producing its own nuclear submarines is still an open question. Many of the specific details of the pact – such as to what extent Australia may have to rely on US industry to begin production – are not yet public, with officials deferring to the 18-month consultation period as the time and place those questions will be asked and answered.

Brent Sadler, a naval analyst at the Heritage Foundation, told Breaking Defense the agreement with Australia has the potential to be a boon for both the US Navy and American industry, despite the initial resources required to get it moving. But that relies on the Australians fronting their fair share of investment as well.

“They’ve made a lot of political commitments, but those come and go like the wind. If they start investing into growing our shared nuclear infrastructure [then] that’s a commitment that you can’t walk back from,” he said.

Sadler emphasized the need for the three countries to “work backwards” to make sure that when the time comes for an Australian submarine to deploy, that the country is also ready with an appropriate number of trained sailors and officers as well as the shipyard workers needed to support that crew.

“In the meantime, as they’re [the Australians] training up, and they’re building out Australian capacities, when a new submarine pulls into a Perth, it can have maintenance done by the Australians... That’s helpful for them because they get experience. It’s helpful for us because we get maintenance done forward.”



Topics: Adm. Frank Caldwell, MMR Strategic Deterrence, naval submarine league, Rear Adm Doug Perry, Rear Adm. Jonathan Rucker

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