

AUKUS Program Marks 'Greatest Industrial Undertaking' for Australia



Then-CNO Admiral Mike Gilday, Royal Navy First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff Adm. Sir Ben Key, and Chief of the Royal Australian Navy Vice Adm. Mark Hammond, tour the Virginia-class fast-attack submarine USS Missouri following the AUKUS bilateral announcement in San Diego, Calif, March 13, 2023.

CREDIT: U.S. Navy | Commander Courtney Hillson

The AUKUS program, the multination effort to provide Australia with nuclear-powered submarines, will kick-start that country's ability to build nuclear subs, an Australian minister said in a panel discussion at Sea-Air-Space on April 8.

Pat Conroy, Australia's minister for defense industry and minister for international development and the Pacific, said

the effort will be a challenge but it was a logical choice to select a partnership of Australian Submarine Corp. and BAE Systems to build the subs, as ASC built Australia's diesel-electric submarines and BAE builds the United Kingdom's Astute and Dreadnought-class submarines.

"For them to form a joint venture for us was the right model," Conroy said. He said it will be a "step up" for them to move to nuclear standards, but they've had a long partnership with General Dynamics Electric Boat in the United States.

"Electric Boat was instrument in fixing some of the challenges that we encountered earlier in the Collins class," Conroy said. "So, we're confident we'll put the ecosystem in and we're investing around \$30 billion Australia to increase our industrial place uplift that will really underpin what is the greatest industrial undertaking our country's ever attempted."

Moderator Megan Eckstein of Defense News noted the United States and United Kingdom are talking about building up the nuclear industrial base, but for Australia, "you're starting from scratch."

Conroy replied, "it's an incredible effort, and lots of progress has been made from legislative rules to establishing a nuclear regulatory authority to starting to train our workers, our industry in the nuclear mindset. It has been a challenge, but also a great opportunity to include Australian companies from the ground floor."

Australia is mounting a full national mobilization, he said, including funding 4,000 additional permanent university places in STEM subjects to grow the workforce.

"We think we need 20,000 workers. We've got Royal Australian Navy sailors working on U.S. submarine tenders in Guam right now, and a hundred ASC employees will be working for harbor sustainment next year," he said.

“So, we’re starting that training pipeline. That \$30 billion dollars will be a massive investment. And while it’s a challenge, there’s also opportunities,” he said.

“I’ve had the privilege of going through Barrow-in-Furness in the U.K. [home of BAE Systems Submarines] and the Groton, Connecticut yard here [home of Electric Boat] and they’ve got tremendous expertise built up over a century. But they’ve also got the challenges of that, of being built around towns like in Barrow-in-Furness. You’ve got terrace houses next to assembly halls because the town and a shipyard being built up together. Having a brownfield site where we can build with the best equipment, with lots of open space, will really allow us to maximize efficiencies and learnings from our oldest partners.”