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UK Submarine Troubles Warn of AUKUS Risks

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The United Kingdom's experience with nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) offers important context for Australia's participation in the AUKUS program, a trilateral security partnership involving Australia, the UK, and the United States. The program aims to develop and deploy nuclear-powered submarines, with Australia planning to acquire US Virginia-class SSNs in the 2030s and collaborate with the UK on the SSN-AUKUS class by the 2040s.

The Royal Navy currently operates four ballistic missile submarines and six attack submarines. Recent analyses have noted challenges in maintaining continuous operational

availability, partly due to maintenance delays and infrastructure limitations. For example, there have been reports of submarines awaiting access to certified dry dock facilities, which are essential for servicing nuclear vessels.

Australia's entry into nuclear submarine operations presents significant technical and operational challenges, as the country has limited experience with nuclear propulsion. Concerns have been raised regarding the environmental risks associated with operating nuclear-powered submarines, including potential impacts on marine ecosystems and the safety of coastal populations. Additionally, the risk of collisions with civilian vessels in busy maritime areas has been highlighted as a factor that requires careful management.

The Australian Labor government, led by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, has emphasized its commitment to the AUKUS program as a key component of national defense and regional security strategy. The Liberal National Party has questioned the government's preparedness to manage the complexities of nuclear submarine operations and has called for greater transparency regarding the program's timeline and resource allocation.

The UK government has invested substantially in upgrading shipbuilding infrastructure to support current and future submarine construction, including an investment estimated at around eight billion US dollars. These upgrades are intended to address some of the maintenance and capacity issues faced by the Royal Navy.

The success of the AUKUS submarine program will depend on effective collaboration between the partner nations and the ability to overcome technical, logistical, and operational challenges. The United Kingdom's experience provides useful lessons for Australia as it develops its nuclear submarine capabilities.