



## **Port Visits to Australia by Nuclear-Powered Vessels: A Historical Context**



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**Cover image**

US Navy Cruiser USS CANBERRA and submarine HALIBUT in Sydney Harbour

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## **Port Visits to Australia by Nuclear-Powered Vessels: A Historical Context**

The announcement in September 2021 that Australia would acquire nuclear-powered submarines (NPS) signalled a significant shift in Australia's defence posture. As part of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) announcement of the optimal pathway in March 2023, the three Governments committed to an increase in visits of nuclear powered vessels to Australian ports by the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) <sup>1</sup>. This increase in visits is a precursor to US and UK submarines beginning a rotational presence at HMAS Stirling – through an initiative called "Submarine Rotational Force – West" (SRF-West). However, this increase also indicative of Australia becoming *sovereign ready* to safely and securely own, operate, maintain and regulate nuclear-powered submarines.

It is important to note that this increase in nuclear-powered vessel visits is not without precedent. A review of the historical record shows that sustained increases in the number of nuclear-powered vessel visits to Australian ports has already occurred twice in recent history. This paper will examine early deliberations by successive Australian Governments in establishing our long-standing arrangements for visiting nuclear-powered vessels. Of interest is the strategic contexts of these previous surges in vessel visits to Australian ports. As this paper illustrates, Australian port support was indeed aligned with our own strategic interests as well as the interests of our partners.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Department of Defence, Pathway To Australia's Nuclear-Powered Submarine Capability Factsheet (<https://www.defence.gov.au/about/taskforces/aukus/optimal-pathway>)

Port visits to Australia by naval vessels of friendly nations, and reciprocal visits by ships of the Royal Australian Navy, are one of the most visible displays of the defence cooperation between countries in peacetime. The overwhelming majority of nuclear-powered vessel visits have been by the United States Navy (USN); with some UK Royal Navy (RN) and French Maritime Nationale (MN) visits.

Focussing on nuclear-powered vessels, since the first visit of USS *Halibut* to Sydney in May 1960, there have been two significant peaks in the frequency of nuclear-powered vessels between 1979 and 1986 and between 1992 and 2003. Broadly, the first peak responded to the shift in US Cold War strategy, which saw the Pacific, and to a lesser extent, the Indian Oceans become a key focus of operations, especially in response to increased Soviet naval activity in the north Pacific, as well as a change in China's maritime force posture away from coastal defence. The second peak responded to increasing operations in the Middle East Region, from the aftermath of the first Gulf War and ongoing sanctions and sabre rattling by Saddam Hussein through to strikes on Afghanistan post the 9/11 terrorist attacks and then the second war in Iraq in 2003. The most common visiting vessel types have been by attack submarines (SSN) with less common visits by aircraft carriers (CVN), Guided Missile Submarines (SSGN) and nuclear powered cruisers (CGN). An important point is that no Ballistic Missile Submarines (SSBN) have ever visited Australian ports.

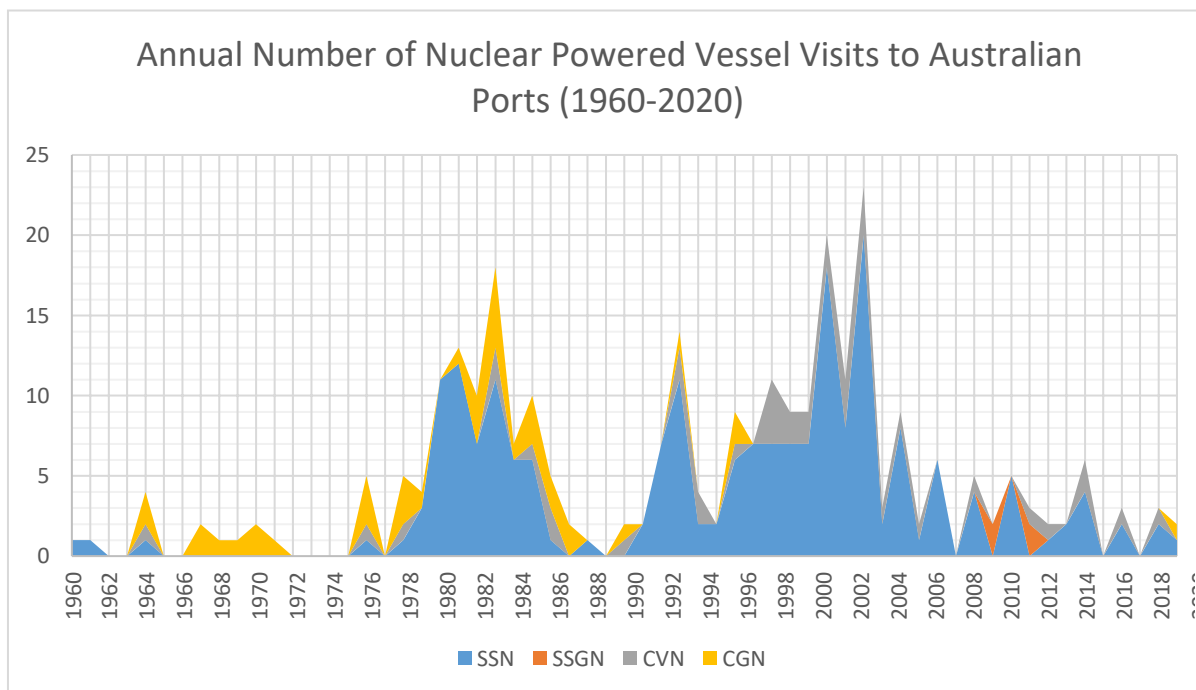


Figure 1: Annual Number of Nuclear Powered Vessel Visits. Sources: Multiple<sup>2</sup>

## First Visits

The first visit by a nuclear-powered submarine to Australia was USS *Halibut II* (SSG(N)-587), which visited Sydney between 1-7 May 1960, after she had visited Wellington in New Zealand. USS *Halibut* was the United States Navy's (USN) first nuclear-powered cruise missile armed submarine, carrying the Regulus I missile and was the short-lived predecessor to Polaris-armed SSBNs. The trip to Australia was her post-commissioning cruise where she became the first SSN to fire a cruise missile.<sup>3</sup> The visit attracted much attention, with several thousand onlookers on the nearby wharves and the Domain

<sup>2</sup> See Notes on Sources in Annex A

<sup>3</sup> US Naval History and Heritage Command, 'Halibut II (SSG(N)-587)', *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/h/halibut-ii.html>

watching as *Halibut* demonstrated the preparations for launch, opening the launch housing, and displaying a Regulus missile.<sup>4</sup>

*USS Halibut* was accompanied by *USS Canberra* and they berthed alongside Fleet Base East near the famous Hammerhead Crane and with one of the submarines of the 4th Royal Navy Squadron located outboard (Figure 7). One year earlier in 1959, the planned withdrawal by UK of the 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Navy Squadron – a succession of UK submarines operating from Australia from 1949 – triggered the consideration of submarines for Australia. While the *Oberon* class was decided upon at that point, there was continued consideration of nuclear-powered submarines well into the 1960's.<sup>5</sup> No doubt, a factor in this interest was the visits from *USS Sargo* in 1961 and *USS Sculpin* in 1964. Also in 1964 the first all nuclear-powered task force circumnavigated the world with the first *USS Enterprise* (CVAN-65), *USS Long Beach* (CG(N)-9), *USS Bainbridge* (DLG(N)-25) visit Melbourne in September 1964.

What these events illustrate is that Australia was at once witnessing the arrival of the United States Nuclear Navy on the world stage and was welcoming them into Australian ports as the Cold War progressed. As an aside; the UK's first visit was much later in 1993 with *HMS Triumph*; likely reflective of the East of Suez policy having focussed RN maritime efforts against the Soviet Union in the Northern hemisphere.

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<sup>4</sup> Royal Australian Navy, *Navy News*, Vol. 3, No. 9, 6 May 1960, <https://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/navy-news/1960>

<sup>5</sup> 'Nuclear powered submarines: Origins', Royal Australian Navy Sea Power Centre, Dr John Nash <https://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/nuclear-powered-submarines-australia-origin-stories>

## Establishment of Visit Protocol

Between 1972 and 1975, there were no visits. This “pause” appears to have been instigated by the McMahon (1971-1972) Government and continued by Whitlam’s, (1972-1975) and was a contested issue as evidenced by an exchange in parliament prior to a speech on the topic in June 1976 between Sir William McMahon and Gough Whitlam.<sup>6</sup> In 1971, the USS *Truxton* visited Fremantle, yet was denied a visit to Sydney. The McMahon government had decided that no visits by nuclear-powered vessels from the US or UK would be approved until ‘other arrangements are officially agreed between Australia and the United States on questions of safety and liability and indemnity for any damage’.<sup>7</sup> Although noting that nuclear-powered vessels had visited Australia since 1960, by 1971 it was decided that the safety assurances provided by the US government for these visits were too general and not specific enough, especially in matters regarding any indemnity for damages in the event of an incident.

What brought about this sudden change in policy is unclear, but it was decided to pause all nuclear-powered ship visits until safety surveys could be conducted on Australian ports. A study was undertaken by the National Radiation Advisory Committee and submitted to the Department of Defence. Questions of ‘environmental impact studies’, liability, and indemnity continued to prevent nuclear powered ship visits into the Whitlam

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<sup>6</sup> House of Representatives, Visits By Nuclear Powered Warships, Ministerial Statement Speech, Friday, 4 June 1976:

<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=ld%3A%22hansard80%2Fhansardr80%2F1976-06-04%2F0054%22;src1=sm1>

<sup>7</sup> Department of Defence Report, ‘Visits by US Nuclear Powered Warships to Australia, Report by Inter-Departmental Committee’, 15 December 1971: NAA: A1838, 672/3/3, Part 8, ‘Visits of Nuclear ships – Policy’.

Government.<sup>8</sup>In 1973, the British had expressed interest in one of their SSN's visiting Australia in the second half of 1973 and were awaiting the Australian government's decision on such nuclear-powered ship visits being approved.<sup>9</sup>

It was not just US warships that were barred entry. In a 31 July 1974 letter, the General Manager of Pilbara Iron Limited had written to the Department of Transport asking if there were restrictions on the entry of nuclear-powered vessels in to Australian ports, and whether or not the nuclear-powered merchant vessel *Otto Hahn* would be permitted into Port Headland to load iron ore. The Minister's response was incredibly vague, noting 'I know you will understand that the use of this type of vessel raises many complex issues. A great deal more work is required to resolve these issues', and thus clearance would not be granted.<sup>10</sup>

What these 'complex issues' were not stated, nor what progress had been made since the 1971 decision by the previous government to halt visits. The liability issue was seemingly resolved in in late 1974/early 1975 with the US passing public law 95-513 which explicitly laid out the US assurance of compensation for any damages caused by US Navy nuclear reactor incidents.<sup>11</sup> The environmental question remained, however, and in April

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<sup>8</sup> Department of Defence, 'Record of Conversation between Dr JR Schlesinger, US Secretary for Defence and L. Barnard, Minister for Defence,' 30 August 1974: NAA: A1838, 672/3/3, Part 13, 'Defence visits - Visits of Nuclear ships - Policy'.

<sup>9</sup> Foreign Affairs brief to the Minister, 672/3/3, 4 April 1973: NAA: A1838, 672/3/3 Part 10, 'Defence visits - Visits of Nuclear ships - Policy'.

<sup>10</sup> Letter, Office of the Secretary to the Department of Transport and Director-General of Civil Aviation, C.C. Halton to General Manager Pilbara Iron Limited, E.P. Herbert, 4 October 1974: NAA: B662, 1972/2974, 'Nuclear Ships - Visits to Australian ports procedure and instructions'.

<sup>11</sup> Letter, Australian Embassy, United States to The Secretary Department of Foreign Affairs, 'Visits to Australia by Nuclear Powered Warships', 25 February 1975: NAA: A1838, 672/3/3 Part 14, 'Visits of Nuclear ships - Policy'.



1975, Whitlam added another hurdle to visits by declaring that as long as the environmental report was satisfactory, the visit of nuclear powered ship would only be permitted under the condition that it 'did not mean an increase in the American presence in the Indian Ocean beyond what had been the average in recent years'.<sup>12</sup>

This all changed with the dismissal of Whitlam and subsequent election of Malcolm Fraser. In 1976, the Fraser government approved the resumption of visits after consideration of Defence interests, consultation with States and environmental concerns being addressed by Cabinet.<sup>13</sup> This detailed examination of all issues involved suggests that Australia was sharing the growing worldwide awareness and appreciation of potential radiological risks from various nuclear activities especially atomic weapons. The first nuclear powered visit after the ban was lifted came two months later in August 1976. The *Skipjack*-class submarine USS *Snook II* arrived at the soon to be Fleet Base West on 14 August, arriving an hour early to avoid any protesters, of which approximately 30 gathered outside of the base.<sup>14</sup> The lifting of the ban was reported in the *New York Times* as part of Prime Minister Fraser's foreign policy strongly supporting 'United States presence in the Indian Ocean to balance increased Soviet military presence in the region.'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cablegram, Kingston to Canberra, 29 April 1975: NAA: A1838, 672/3/3 Part 14, 'Visits of Nuclear ships – Policy'.

<sup>13</sup> NAA: A12909, 292: Submission No 292 : Visits of nuclear powered warships to Australia - Decisions 840, 901 and 929; Attachment - Environmental considerations of visits of nuclear powered warships to Australia -

Department of Defence May 1976:

<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=7426479&isAv=N>

<sup>14</sup> HMAS *Stirling* was not commissioned until 28 July 1978, though ship visits began earlier than this date.

<https://www.navy.gov.au/establishments/fleet-base-west>; *New York Times*, 'A U.S. Nuclear Sub Visits Australia After Ban Is Lifted', 15 August 1976.

<sup>15</sup> *New York Times*, 'A U.S. Nuclear Sub Visits Australia After Ban Is Lifted', 15 August 1976.

While the strategic and political machinations of the era are noteworthy, the result of this period was the codification of special procedures to ensure that the safety of the public was maintained because of the nature of nuclear propelled warships propulsion plants. These arrangements are described fully in *Defence Operations Manual - Visits To Australia By Nuclear-Powered Warships*<sup>16</sup> and have remained in place since 1981. Visits by nuclear-powered vessels to Australian ports are accepted only to berths and anchorages that have been assessed against radiological criteria and approved by the Visiting Ships Panel–Nuclear, a Defence-led, cross government panel consisting of Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency (ARPANSA), Australia's Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO), Emergency Management Australia (EMA), Department of Health, Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water and representatives from the states and territories.

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<sup>16</sup>Defence Operations Manual (OPSMAN1) - Visits To Australia By Nuclear-Powered Warships:  
[https://www.arpansa.gov.au/sites/default/files/defence\\_operations\\_manual\\_opsman1\\_-\\_visits\\_to\\_australia\\_by\\_nuclear-powered\\_warships.pdf](https://www.arpansa.gov.au/sites/default/files/defence_operations_manual_opsman1_-_visits_to_australia_by_nuclear-powered_warships.pdf)

## First Peak: 1979-1986

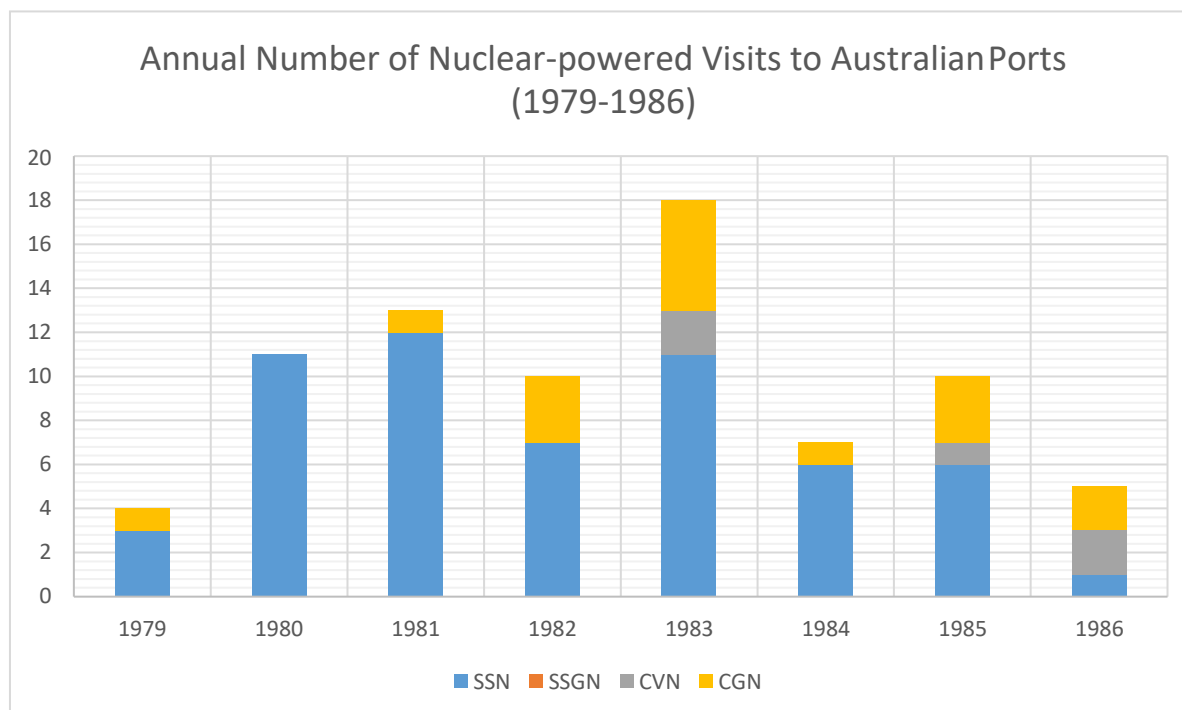


Figure 2: Annual Number of Nuclear Powered Visits 1979-1986. Sources: Multiple

Far from hindering visits by nuclear-powered vessels, these arrangements preceded the first peak in visits between 1979 and 1986. There were 78 visits in total with all being from the US Navy and the vast majority were nuclear-powered submarines.

The strategic context was the Cold War competition between two superpowers intensified as the US Reagan administration built up US military capabilities and USSR attempted to respond to this with increasing expenditure and resources; a demand which became a major factor in the later collapse of the Soviet system. The Soviets increasingly came to see the value of the SSBN fleet as part of its nuclear deterrence strategy. Central to this became the use of the Sea of Okhotsk as an SSBN patrol area with the Soviet Navy

engaging in a sea denial strategy to keep these strategic assets protected. This in turn made the north Pacific an increasingly important area of operations for the US Navy.<sup>17</sup>

The US Navy continued development of a new Maritime Strategy in the early 1980s. This was driven by many factors, including the 'Soviet success in producing increasingly quiet submarines' as well as moves to base naval forces in Vietnam and the revelation that highly sensitive US naval information had been leaked to the Soviets.<sup>18</sup>

A presentation to the Secretary of the Navy on 4 November 1982 laid out the thinking behind the Navy's development of its new Maritime Strategy. Soviet Naval Force Posture in the Pacific was assessed as 'Control Sea of Japan/Sea of Okhotsk. Operate in NW Pacific (Protect SSBN OP Areas/Homeland. Attack threatening Allied Forces). Soviet Force in Vietnam Position to interdict SLOCs to IO [Indian Ocean]. North Korean Forces Threaten Regional SLOCs.'<sup>19</sup> Not only were Soviet SSBNs in the Sea of Okhotsk a focus, but as global trade expanded and the Asia-Pacific region and Indian Ocean grew in importance, Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) protection became an important consideration in US maritime strategy.

This shift in Soviet and US maritime strategy took on a regional dimension for Australia.

As seen above, the Soviets increasingly looked to expand their influence in the Pacific southwards and Vietnam was ideally placed for this:

*They provided modern aircraft and weapons systems and began a program of advanced military training, including anti-submarine exercises off Danang, Vietnam. The harbour at Cam Ranh Bay was developed*

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<sup>17</sup>Ushirogata, Keitaro, 'Maritime military powers in the Indo-Pacific Region: A comparative analysis of Japan, Australia and India, 1980–2017', *Soundings*, Issue 19.2021, Sea Power Australia, p. 6-11: <https://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/soundings-papers-maritime-military-powers-indo-pacific-region-comparative>

<sup>18</sup>Hattendorf, John B. and Swartz, Peter M. (eds.), *U.S. Naval Strategy in the 1980s*, Naval War College Press, Newport, Rhode Island, 2008, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup>Hattendorf and Swartz, *U.S. Naval Strategy in the 1980s*, 2008, p. 28.

*into a major facility with up to 30 Soviet ships deployed, including nuclear submarines. Soviet maritime patrol aircraft and anti-submarine helicopters were also based at the adjacent airfield at Nha Trang. Cam Ranh Bay provided the Soviet Union with a counter to the large US Naval Base at Subic Bay on the other side of the South China Sea.<sup>20</sup>*

At first glance, the volume of USN visits could simply be understood in the context of USN submarine force involved in intelligence gathering of the style explained in books such as *Blind Man's Bluff*, published in 1999 by Sherry Sontag and Christopher Drew. However, in parallel, this increased volume of visits accompanied a profound shift in the co-operation between USN, RN and RAN submarine forces. Australia started to directly participate:

*Between 1978 and 1992 Australian Oberon class submarines conducted top secret intelligence collection patrols in areas to the north and west of Australia. The most common targets of these patrols were the naval and maritime air forces of the Soviet Union, and in particular those elements based in the South China Sea at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam ...*

*...US, British and Allied forces were already conducting similar operations, primarily out of growing concern about the expanding Soviet Pacific Fleet. Naturally the Russians, and later the Chinese, were doing likewise in various parts of the world.<sup>21</sup>*

The specifics of submarine operations and co-operation between USN, RN and RAN submarine forces - then as is now - has long been the subject of public speculation and interest. Instead of focussing on sensitive details, an apt conclusion here is that Australia was involved far more than providing ports of opportunity to US Navy. The changing

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<sup>20</sup> Australian Submarines: A History, Edition 2, Volume 1, Chapter 20, Section 20.11.2 The Strategic Outlook in the late 1980s

<sup>21</sup> Australian Submarines: A History, Edition 2, Volume 1, Chapter 20, Section 20.11 Submarine Intelligence Patrols

strategic context also provided the impetus for co-operation between submarine forces during the same period when Australia was considering the replacement submarine for the *Oberon* class. Given the serious and detailed discussions three decades earlier, replacing *Oberon* class with nuclear-powered submarines appears to have been looked by at least some.<sup>22</sup> In contrast with the abundance of declassified documents on the topic from 1959-1970<sup>23</sup>, publically available evidence of seriousness of this consideration is sparse.

Aside the strategic factors, sometimes a visit was simply a demonstration of the superior range and endurance of a nuclear powered submarine as shown by USS *Dallas* in 1984:

*The submarine completed a six-month global circumnavigation, a cruise that included rounding the Cape of Good Hope and passing through the Panama Canal, when she deployed to the Indian Ocean (18 May–8 December 1984). The submarine operated at times with two carrier battle groups and a maritime patrol squadron, and visited Diego Garcia, British Indian Ocean Territory, and Perth and Albany in Western Australia.*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The Collins Class Story: Steel Spies and Spin, Peter Yule and Derek Woolner Page 33; Australian Submarines: A History, Edition 2, Volume 1, Chapter 21, Section 21.1 Oberon Replacement Project, Page 560; Navy League of Australia – Nuclear Powered Submarines for Australia? By John Grover and Andrew Robertson, September 1991

<sup>23</sup> Nuclear-Powered Submarines for Australia: Origin Stories, Dr John Nash (<https://www.navy.gov.au/media-room/publications/nuclear-powered-submarines-australia-origin-stories>)

<sup>24</sup> Naval History and Heritage Command – History of USS Dallas III (SSN-700) 1981–2017 (<https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/d/dallas-iii.html>)

### Second Peak: 1992-2003

Conventionally-armed nuclear-powered vessel visits again surged between 1992 and 2003. There were 126 visits in total, with 119 USN, 4 RN and 3 MN vessels. By type, the majority were still submarines (102), with aircraft carriers (21) and surface combatants (3) forming a minority of vessel types. Notably, this period saw the decommissioning of the US Navy's nuclear-powered cruisers, with the last two decommissioned in 1999. After this, the only two types of nuclear-powered vessels to visit Australia were either submarines or aircraft carriers.

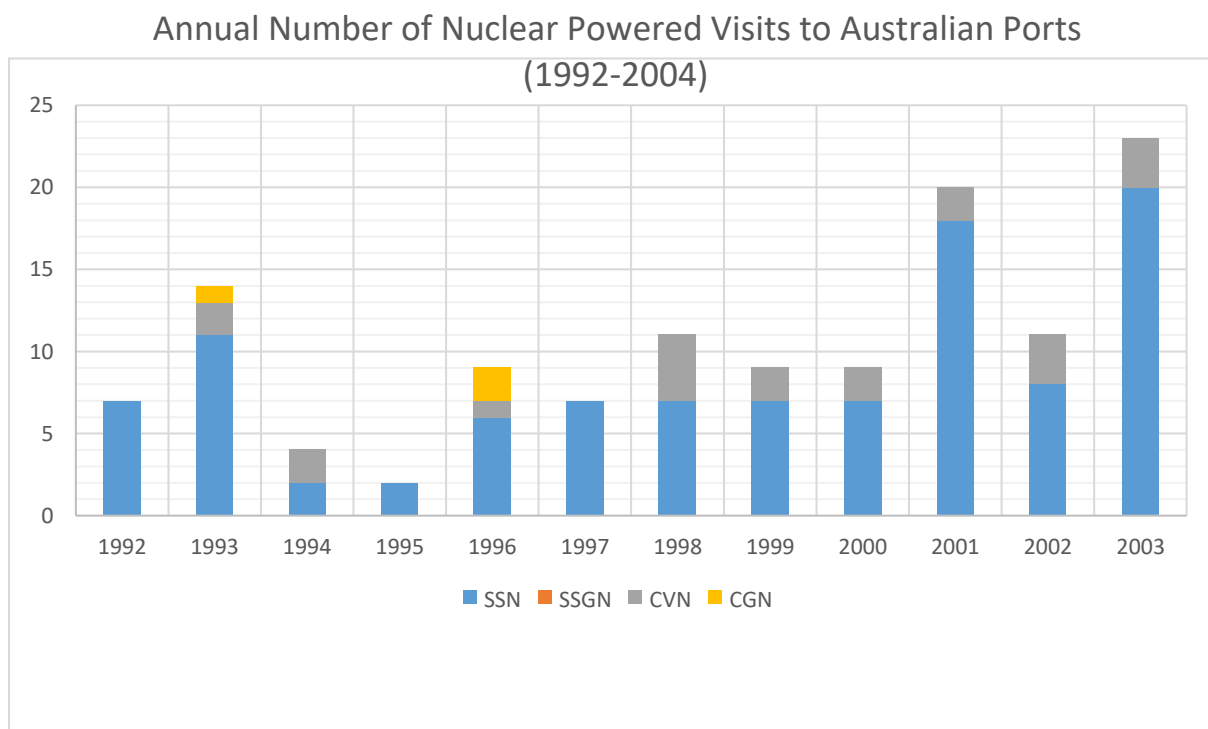


Figure 3: Annual Number of Nuclear Powered Visits 1992-2004. Sources: Multiple<sup>25</sup>

This period saw increasing demands placed upon USN, RN and RAN in the Indo-Pacific as the collapse of the Soviet Union, first Iraq War, the September 11 terrorist attacks, Afghanistan and second Iraq War. These factors resulted in more port visits than ever culminating in 2003 in the highest annual number of 23.

<sup>25</sup> See Notes on Sources in Annex A

## Second Peak: 1992-2003

As the dust from the Cold War settled, the world's focus had shifted towards the Middle East during the First Gulf War and Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. This focus remained there after Iraq's expulsion from Kuwait and ongoing sanctions against Saddam's regime. A history of US Naval Forces Central Command (CENTCOM) puts it best: 'In the decade following the Gulf War, containment of Iraq (and Iran) remained the primary strategic consideration in shaping U.S. military planning and force posture for the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and East Africa.'<sup>26</sup> With these operations ongoing in the Middle East and Africa, Australia was again geographically placed in a favourable location to support US naval vessels.

For the USN, as the operating environment shifted to the Middle East in the early 1990s, there was the challenge of having no permanent U.S. bases in the area, so forward-deployed ships became increasingly important as the United States worked to demonstrate the continuity of American commitments and maintain stability in the region.<sup>27</sup> While CENTCOM did have its subordinate maritime command, US NAVCENT, there was no permanent Fleet assigned to the CENTCOM AO until 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet was reactivated on 1 July 1995.<sup>28</sup> Until that time, naval forces were assigned primarily from the Pacific-based 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet operating out of Japan. An example would be USS *Birmingham* (SSN-695), which visited HMAS *Stirling* and Brisbane in Jun 1993 and was part of USS *Nimitz* (CVN-68) battle group deployed to Arabian Gulf and Western Pacific.

Saddam Hussein continued to push the United Nations and the United States over the following years. In 1995, Hussein moved forces towards the Kuwait border, eliciting a response from CENTCOM in form of Operation Vigilant Sentinel, which included moving a second aircraft carrier to the region.<sup>29</sup> In 1997 'Saddam rattled his saber once again, violating the no-fly zones, threatening to shoot down reconnaissance aircraft, and interfering with U.N. weapons inspection teams.'<sup>30</sup> In February 1998, Saddam denied UN

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<sup>26</sup> Schneller, Robert J., *Anchor of Resolve: A History of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/Fifth Fleet*, Naval Historical Center, Washington D.C., 2007, p. 59.

<sup>27</sup> USN Historical Command, Overview: Desert Storm – The Role of the Navy  
<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/u/us-navy-in-desert-shield-desert-storm/desert-storm-overview-the-role-of-the-navy.html>

<sup>28</sup> Schneller, *Anchor of Resolve*, 2007, p. x.

<sup>29</sup> Schneller, *Anchor of Resolve*, 2007, p. 60.

<sup>30</sup> Schneller, *Anchor of Resolve*, 2007, p. 61.



weapons inspectors access to sites suspected of being weapons depots or factories. CENTCOM responded with operation Desert Thunder, which again saw a two-carrier presence in the Gulf for several months. On 16 December 1998, CENTCOM launched Operation Desert Fox, a series of strikes against Saddam. It saw four days of operations by US and British aircraft and cruise missiles. Aircraft were sortied from USS *Enterprise* and USS *Carl Vinson*, as well as 325 Tomahawks launched from various units.<sup>31</sup>

### Afghanistan

The 9/11 terrorist attacks saw an even greater focus on the Middle East Region as the US and its coalition partners sought to rapidly strike at Al Qaeda and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that supported and sheltered bin Laden and his terrorist network. Afghanistan is, of course, a land-locked country, and one bordered by few countries sympathetic to the US cause. Any response then would be primarily from the sea.

Prime Minister Howard was in Washington DC at the time of 9/11. Indeed, the day before he had been at the Washington Navy Yard at a ceremony to receive the ship's bell of USS *Canberra*, the very same ship that had accompanied USS *Halibut* in the first nuclear powered vessel visit to Australia in May of 1960. Once Howard had returned to Australia, it did not take long for the Australian and US governments to agree on the invocation of the ANZUS treaty in response to the attack on the US. With this in mind, it is not surprising to learn that aside from the more obvious military commitments, Australia was also willing to help provide support to America in other ways, including visits by USN ships and submarines go to and from the Middle East.<sup>32</sup> As an example; when USS *Key West* visited HMAS Stirling in 2003, Commander Richard Tilghman said the submarine is on a six-month anti-terrorist patrol mission.

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<sup>31</sup> Schneller, *Anchor of Resolve*, 2007, pp. 61-62.

<sup>32</sup> These issues will be covered in more detail by the forthcoming Official History series, covering Australian operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Middle East 2001-2014:

<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/understanding-military-history/official-histories/iraq-afghanistan-timor>

*After September 11, 2001, President George Bush made that our mission to counter terrorism and whether that's actual combat or intelligence gathering or simply naval presence, that's what we're doing.<sup>33</sup>*

### Second Iraq War

The year 2003 saw the most visits ever recorded in a single year at 23. What was illustrative was the number of SSN visits: *Louisville* (3), *Honolulu* (4) and *Columbia* (4), *City Of Corpus Christi* (4). This of course is precedent for the recent announcement of SRF-West rotational presence at HMAS Stirling (albeit some 24 years later).

Australia as part of the 'coalition of the willing' provided port visits to US forces, both pre- and post- strike. Australia's geography continued to make it an appealing place to stop going to and from the Middle East from Hawaii or the US West Coast, and so it was no surprise that Australia would be the primary choice for port visits.

*Louisville's* visit was explicitly mentioned as being post-Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) Tomahawk firings. She visited *Stirling* three times in 2003. In 2003, *Louisville* participated in OIF, launching 16 Tomahawk missiles from the Red Sea against targets in Iraq. Her deployment was extended to eight and a half months in support of the campaign and she was awarded the Navy Unit Commendation for her role in the operation.

### **Conclusion**

In the announced optimal pathway for Australia's acquisition of NPS, increased port visits by AUKUS partners is a clear key element of the necessary building of Australia nuclear powered submarines expertise and experience.

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<sup>33</sup> ABC News Online, Terror fight brings nuclear submarine to WA 14 Apr 2003  
([https://www.abc.net.au/news/2003-04-14/terror-fight-brings-nuclear-submarine-to-wa/1836226?utm\\_campaign=abc\\_news\\_web&utm\\_content=link&utm\\_medium=content\\_shared&utm\\_source=abc\\_news\\_web](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2003-04-14/terror-fight-brings-nuclear-submarine-to-wa/1836226?utm_campaign=abc_news_web&utm_content=link&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_source=abc_news_web))

This element of the pathway should not be viewed as revolutionary or without precedent - port visits by conventionally-armed nuclear-powered vessels have previously increased in response to shared national interests and changing strategic circumstances. This time around there are additional objectives such as RAN sailors joining USN and RN crews for training and development and opportunity to develop critical experience with nuclear-powered submarines at sea and at port.

These port visits have been but one aspect of the deep cooperation between respective nation's submarine forces over many decades. It is worth considering that since 1960, there have been a total of 288 nuclear-powered vessel visits totalling a cumulative 1842 days in Australian ports.

## **Annex A - Notes on Historical Record**

This paper has tabulated a list of all visits from 1960. In validating this list used to generate Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4 and Figure 5, a number of sources have been correlated and cross-referenced; including:

- a. ARPANSA annual reporting to Australian Parliament in support of VSP-N
- b. Visit Register maintained by Royal Australian Navy - Naval Engineering in support of VSP-N
- c. Open Source Ships Histories held by Royal Australian Navy, United States Navy, Royal Navy and Maritime Nationale
- d. Public reporting of visits by media of the time

The author wishes to thank Felicity Spurrett and LCDR Charlie Jones for their assistance.

**Annex B – Nuclear-Powered Visits (1960-2020)**

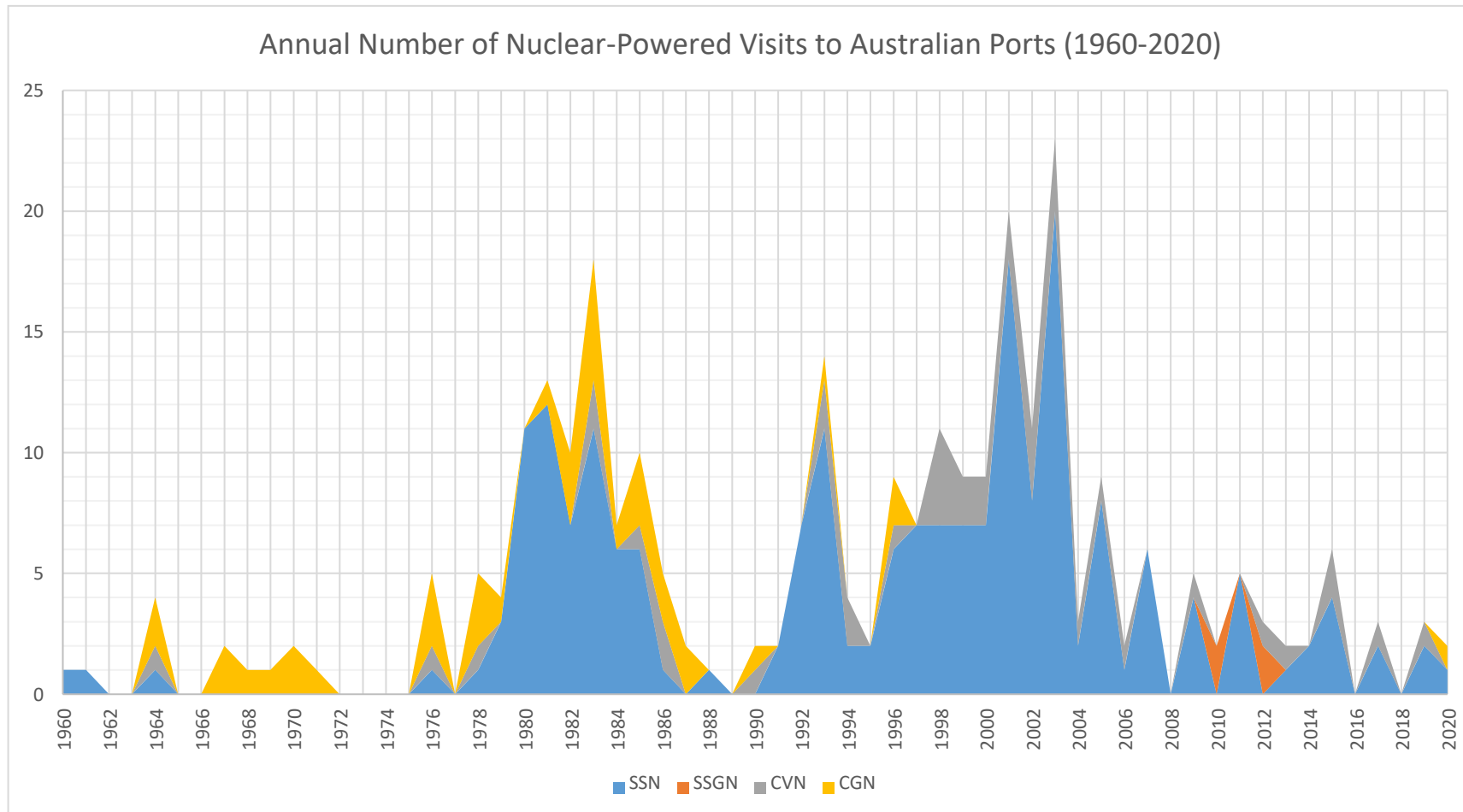


Figure 4: Annual Number of Nuclear Powered Visits. Sources: Multiple<sup>34</sup>

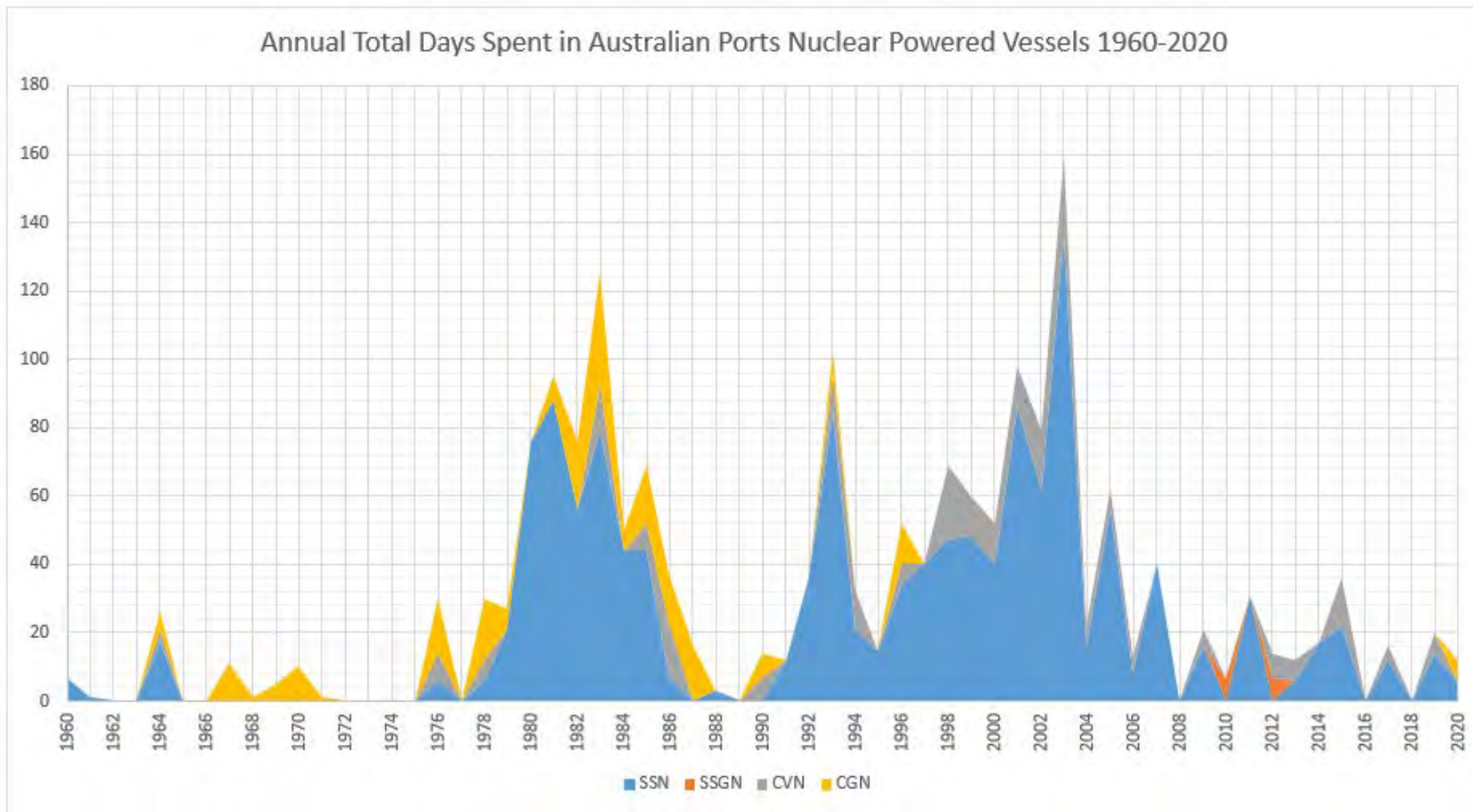


Figure 5: Annual Total Days of Nuclear Powered Visits. Sources: Multiple (See Notes on Sources in Annex A)

Annex C



*Figure 6: USS Halibut displaying a Regulus missile<sup>36</sup>*

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<sup>36</sup> *Navy News* Vol.3 No. 9, 6 May 1960, Sea Power Centre Australia



*Figure 7: USS Canberra and USS Halibut 1960. Cover Image.*





*Figure 8: KN-9027 Nuclear powered warships Enterprise, Long Beach & Banbridge 18  
June 1964.*



*Figure 9: U.S.S. HALIBUT stamped mail marking "Good Will Visit Down Under" to Sydney, Australia on 4 May 1960. Source: <http://www.philatelicdatabase.com/united-states/a-tale-of-two-submarines-in-sydney-harbour-1960/>).*