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No. 121/2010 dated 27 September 2010

Diving in Changing Times: Malaysia's Submarine Programme

By Kelvin Wong

Synopsis

The recent fleet integration exercise and successful launch of an anti-ship missile by the KD Tunku Abdul Rahman is a significant milestone for the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN)'s submarine programme. Despite its difficult journey initially, beset by technical difficulties as well as controversies, Malaysia's modern submarine force should be off to a start.

Commentary

IN THE early 1990s Malaysia began considering acquiring submarine capabilities for its navies. A request from the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) for two new and two refurbished platforms from Sweden was approved by the Federal government, although the plan was subsequently scrapped in 1991. The financial turmoil caused by the Asian economic crisis in 1997 further delayed plans to establish the RMN's 'silent service'.

Malaysia's submarine ambitions

In August 2000, then Defence Minister Najib Razak reiterated Malaysia's intention to acquire submarines as part of the overall modernisation of the Malaysian armed forces. Extensive discussions with a number of submarine builders were conducted around this period to explore potential options. While these options were considered, the RMN dispatched a number of its personnel overseas to gain knowledge of submarine operations and support.

Three European firms bid for the opportunity to equip the RMN's future submarine fleet. France's DCN International (now DCNS) offered the transfer of an ex-French navy Agosta submarine, a six-year crew training package in Toulon, followed by the sale of two new Scorpene-class vessels jointly developed with Spanish firm Bazan (now Navantia). The German-Turkish Submarine Corporation led by Howaldtswerke Deutsche Werft (HDW) and Ferrostaal proposed the lease of two Turkish navy Type-209 vessels, a training package, and the subsequent sale of two new, later versions of the Type-209.

Finally, the now-defunct Dutch firm RDM Submarines offered to reactivate two of its ex-Royal Netherlands navy Zwaardvis-class vessels, and promoted its newer Moray-class submarine as a longer-term option. However, by late 2001 it became apparent that DCNS led the pack as the Malaysian government's preferred bidder. In June 2002, the government awarded a US\$969 million contract to DCNS-Navantia for two Scorpene-class submarines.

Teething Start

The acquisition of the RMN's submarine fleet was not without its controversies. Allegations of graft and corruption were levelled at the government soon after the purchase of the vessels, which had been brokered by a newly set up firm, Perimekar. Among the issues in contention was that Perimekar had been set up just prior to the sale of the submarines and had no track record in defence acquisitions. These matters have been languishing in local courts for the past eight years, although French investigators have pursued the case in Parisian courts after receiving formal complaints from a Malaysian human rights group.

Nevertheless, the RMN's first submarine, KD Tunku Abdul Rahman, sailed home to a boisterous welcome at the navy's Pulau Indah deepwater base at Port Klang on 3 September 2009, after a 54-day journey from the Toulon dock in France where it was built. It was subsequently relocated to the RMN's submarine base at Sepanggar, Sabah in East Malaysia.

However, the initial elation over the KD Tunku Abdul Rahman's arrival was soon overshadowed by technical issues which delayed formal sea trials in tropical waters. In early 2010, the chief of the RMN Admiral Tan Sri Abdul Aziz revealed to the press that a number of defects have been discovered shortly after the welcoming ceremony in September. A flaw in the KD Tunku Abdul Rahman's forward seawater cooling system was discovered in December 2009, followed by the discovery of a problem with the vessel's high pressure air blowing system.

While the severity of the defects was not discussed, they certainly have prevented the brand new submarine from diving for at least three months until they have been rectified by DCNS-Navantia, drawing criticism from opposition politicians and the media. As a consequence, an important underwater trial was postponed from January to February, delaying the submarine's initial operation capability (IOC) certification process.

Since then, the initial teething issues seem to have been resolved – the KD Tunku Abdul Rahman completed all of its scheduled tropical water trials and achieved IOC in June 2010. Just a month later, it successfully completed an underwater test-firing of an anti-ship missile in the South China Sea, as well as operational and fleet integration exercises with other major vessels of the RMN. The second submarine, KD Tun Razak arrived in the same month and is currently undergoing sea trials. The RMN hopes that these recent successes will stifle the ongoing criticism over its submarine programme.

Beyond IOC: sustaining the submarine fleet

Purchasing submarines does not provide a capability in itself. To deploy an effective capability that requires significant investment not only in the warfighting platforms, but also operational infrastructure, and training and support facilities. These requirements are gradually being addressed. In April this year the government purchased a simulator system as well as a comprehensive crew-training package from DCNS. Four months later it awarded a contract to Boustead-DCNS Naval Corporation – a joint venture by DCNS and local engineering firm Boustead Heavy Industries Corporation – for maintenance and support services.

After nearly a decade in the making and overcoming numerous hurdles, Malaysia has finally acquired a modern submarine force. The next challenge for the RMN then is to fully nurture its fledging silent service and sustain it over the long term in the face of a tightening defence budget. The outlook, however, remains positive as the payoffs from the investments on fleet development, infrastructure, and training eventually materialise.

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