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Indonesia's New Submarine Bids: An undersea Buildup?

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Synopsis

Jakarta is to decide on the supplier for its new submarines by the end of this year. Although some doubt whether the new boats would boost Jakarta's underwater warfare capability, they reflect the Navy's push for its modernisation plan.

Commentary

INDONESIA IS to decide on the supplier of up to three submarines for its Navy by the end of 2011. South Korea and Germany-Turkey are currently the leading contenders for a contract worth USD1.1 billion. The purchase is to replace the two archaic Type-209/1300 diesel-electric boats acquired from Germany in 1981.

Some argue that Jakarta's bid goes beyond mere modernisation and points more to a naval build-up. The Indonesian government has stipulated the need for at least six to twelve submarines to attain the "minimum essential forces" by 2029. It is still questionable though whether these submarines would bolster the Navy's undersea arm as modernisation often proves to be cosmetic.

Troubled Bids

Submarine procurement has already been in the Navy's wish-list since 2005, when it unveiled the "Green-Water-Navy" blueprint. But, tender processes have been frequently postponed, citing financial reasons. The last one saw the Navy opting for Russian Kilo-and Amur-class subs, but was shelved as Indonesia was unable to commit a 15% down payment. The current process started last year, with Russia, France, Germany, and South Korea as bidders. In mid-2011, the Navy disqualified Russia's Kilo and Germany's U-209, leaving only South Korea's Type 209/1200 Chang Bogo and France's Scorpene.

Analysts are divided on the reason for disqualification. Some argue that Jakarta prefers smaller boats, for which the Kilos/Amurs are ill-suited. Others recall that Russia and Germany were too late in submitting their proposals. In general, many believe that Jakarta already has its eyes on Seoul's offer of three boats, as compared to France's two, for the same amount of money.

Nevertheless, Germany re-entered the bid through Turkey to offer its U-209 and since then has emerged as the second strongest bidder. But despite Turkey's deal, which includes a "sweetener" of one additional boat for lease, its offer of only two boats does not entice Jakarta. Furthermore, Indonesia already has 30 years of cooperation with Seoul ranging from building its patrol and amphibious assault ships to refitting its Cakra

submarines. IHS Jane's also reports that Seoul would get eight Indonesian CN-235 maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) in exchange for two Chang Bogos.

The issue of whether Indonesia is going to use an air-independent propulsion (AIP) system, which permits a submarine to submerge longer, remains hazy. But even a modest offer to install Korea's Chang Bogo with a flank array sonar system, which enables longer range detection and localisation of targets, was dismissed for financial reasons. Thus, an AIP system may be unlikely at present, though it is not impossible in a better fiscal climate, because not only would it raise unit cost, but AIP-submarines would also be too expensive for the Navy to maintain and operate.

However, for the first time Indonesian subs will be armed with anti-ship cruise missiles, possibly with the SM-39 Exocet, while still relying on the locally-manufactured torpedoes as it does on the Cakras. The local naval shipyard, PT. PAL, is involved in the technology transfer scheme in the deal. The first two boats will be built at the Korean dockyards, while the third at PT. PAL's. But with such a small number, Jakarta is unlikely to master submarine technology anytime soon, as it ideally requires dozens of boats and decades of operational experience.

Historical Lessons

History shows that Jakarta is still a long way off to effectively translate naval hardware into warfare, especially submarine warfare. The latter puts enormous strains on crew training and requires high technological literacy to maintain stealth, yet must still wreak havoc on the enemy. Failing this, a submarine is just a vulnerable tin can at sea, although a well-manned submarine fitted only with modest technology could still be a potent threat for surface warships. The sinking of South Korean corvette Cheon An by a North Korean midget submarine is one example.

Indonesia started to operate submarines in early 1960s with twelve Whiskey-class boats acquired as part of Soviet military aid. The boats were immediately put into action against the Dutch West Guinea in 1961-1962, and against Malaysia and British Commonwealth forces during Konfrontasi (Confrontation) in 1963-1966. However, these boats, by themselves, were of limited utility as an offensive platform. Following a diplomatic freeze with Moscow in mid-1960s, Jakarta gradually phased out the Whiskeys.

A rapprochement with the West gave it another opportunity to revamp military hardware. In 1981, Indonesia purchased two Type-209/1300 (Cakra-class) boats from West Germany, which are still in service.

Undersea Ambitions

Jakarta's naval planners seem to learn from history. A joint submarine exercise with the United States, Singapore and South Korea is being planned and expected to be finalised by early 2012. Obviously, the exercise is to familiarise Jakarta with the latest doctrinal and operational trends in submarine warfare in anticipation of operating the new subs. At least, Jakarta can portray a higher degree of resolve to countries questioning or disputing its maritime territorial claims.

China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea and a dispute with Malaysia over Ambalat waters off East Kalimantan helped propel naval modernisation forward. Jakarta recently increased its military procurement budget by 35% to IDR64.4 trillion (USD7.5 billion) in 2012. With this purse, it should have more to spend on its naval shopping spree.

As more submarines proliferate in and around Southeast Asia, Jakarta's build-up is only part of the picture. IHS Jane's forecasts that by 2020, Southeast Asia will have at least 13 submarines, with Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines recently joining the race. This could lead regional navies to invest more in anti-submarine warfare assets. As the best platform to hunt a submarine is also a submarine, Jakarta's bid seems to be justified.

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