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Political Hijinks: Australia's Submarine Programme Deadlocked?

By Sam Bateman

Synopsis

Australia's plans for new submarines have run into major difficulties with political controversy and a failure to define the type of submarine required and the systems it might carry.

Commentary

AUSTRALIA'S SUBMARINE acquisition programme to replace 12 ageing Collins class vessels is locked in political controversy. Some six years after the Defence White Paper in 2009 endorsed it, no decision has been made to acquire these submarines. Instead the programme, mired in political brouhaha, is facing ongoing uncertainty about just what is the requirement.

In broad terms, the requirement is for a large conventional-powered submarine capable of travelling from bases in Australia to the East Asian seas. The idea of a nuclear-powered vessel has been set aside due to the lack of a nuclear power industry in Australia although the benefits of acquiring such a vessel regularly surface in the great submarine debate in Australia.

What's on offer?

While initially it had been assumed that a European design would be the likely choice, all this changed in 2014 when Australian Prime Minister Abbott entered into a handshake deal with Prime Minister Abe of Japan to explore joint submarine development. However, this deal became a political 'hot potato' in Australia as it was seen as likely that a Japanese solution would involve less involvement of Australian ship builders than a European choice.

Abbott then backed off from his Japanese deal (a so-called 'Captain's pick') when the matter became a source of discontent in his parliament leadership that threatened to unseat him as prime minister. There is strong political support in Canberra, including within Abbott's own party, for a maximum level of Australian industry involvement in the project.

The main contenders under consideration are from Japan, Germany and France. These countries have now been invited to participate in a competitive evaluation process to assess their ability to partner with Australia to develop a submarine that meets Australia's capability requirements. Sweden

which had been seen as an outside possibility has not been invited perhaps for what some members of the political Opposition in Canberra have seen as a faulty appreciation of Sweden's submarine-building capabilities.

The Japanese option is an enhanced next generation submarine based on the existing Soryu class vessel. It would reflect the considerable experience of Japan in the design and building of submarines but concerns have been expressed about the likely size of the crew of this option and whether the required long range will be achievable.

The German option is a Type 216 Class submarine which will be an up-sized version of the popular Type 214 submarine which has been built for Greece, Portugal and South Korea with possible sales to Pakistan and Turkey. With extensive German experience in building submarines, there is confidence that the option will meet Australia's requirement for long range and endurance.

The French option is a conventional-powered version of the planned nuclear-powered Barracuda-class submarine. Significant alterations will be required for the vessel to meet Australian requirements. However, like the Germans and unlike the Japanese, the French have significant experience in building submarines overseas in conjunction with foreign builders.

Stumbling blocks

There are four main 'stumbling blocks' to reaching a way ahead. The first is that Australia's requirement for a 'big' conventional submarine is unique. All the options on offer are going to require substantial modification to meet Australia's requirements with a commensurate level of technical risk. A nuclear-powered vessel would meet the requirements but this is not on the cards.

The second 'stumbling block' is that Australia is likely locked into American weapons and systems, particularly the combat data system – Australia has already sunk over AUD\$500 million into the joint development and management of the system used in the existing Collins-class vessels and preferred for the new vessels. While American systems may be available with the Japanese offer, they may not be approved for the European options.

European builders build for the global submarine market and the Americans may assess that this could involve an unacceptable risk of leakage of highly classified data associated with the combat data system in particular. This may have been the consideration that led Tony Abbott to opt for the Japanese solution.

The third difficulty is trying to make an accurate assessment of the future strategic environment in which the new submarines will be employed. Who is to say what that might look like? The new submarines will probably not enter service for up to ten years and may then remain in service for a further 30 years. Credible scenarios for the future must include a significant decline in American power and influence within the region, as well as conflict between China and Japan in which Australia may not take sides.

In these regional circumstances, the Japanese option may involve some loss of long-term strategic independence for Australia. The European options bring with them greater strategic flexibility.

The last 'stumbling' block is provided by developments in submarine detection systems and signal processing. The seas are becoming more transparent. Over the life of the new submarine, it may become more difficult, if not impossible, for Australia to deploy its submarines covertly through the archipelagos to its North and into the East Asian seas.

What does all this mean?

Consideration of these 'stumbling blocks' suggests that Australia could well be better off accepting an existing design of a smaller and cheaper submarine from a European builder. Such a vessel would be capable of the required tasks in Australia's maritime approaches and defending sea lines of communication.

The submarines could be built in Australia with low technical risk and a saving of billions of dollars to

the Defence budget. If Australia went down that path rather than persisting with the big and expensive solution, the delays of the last six years may well turn out to be fortuitous.

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