Costly submarine blunder jeopardises our security

GARY JOHNSTON March 12, 2020

More than century ago, the Royal Australian Navy acquired its first submarines. Built in Britain, AE1 and AE2 were state-of-the-art platforms, embodying the world's best contemporary technology. They were powered by diesel engines and lead acid batteries.

Forty years later, USS Nautilus, the world's first nuclear-powered submarine, put to sea. It had a similar revolutionary effect as the entry into service of HMS Dreadnought in 1905. At least at the highest end of offensive operations, diesel submarines were arguably rendered obsolete.

In April 2016, 101 years after AE2 entered the Dardanelles on a very successful wartime mission and 62 years after the Nautilus's maiden voyage, prime minister Malcolm Turnbull announced the French government-owned Naval Group had been selected to design Australia's future submarine, the Attack class. And like AE1, it would have diesel engines and lead acid batteries. If all went well, the first submarine would enter service in 2035. The program will cost an eye-watering $50bn — perhaps much more — in constant 2018 prices. Australia already holds the record for the most expensive surface warships of their size ever built with the Hobart-class air-warfare destroyers. It looks like we are about to extend our gold medal performance to the underwater.

Last December, the US Navy ordered nine Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarines at a contract price of $US22bn ($33bn). This was said at the time to be the largest warship building deal (watch this space). These will be more than twice the size of Australia's Attack class, with a significantly more potent offensive capability and unlimited endurance. Over their 30-year life they will never need refuelling. They will all enter service this decade, the ninth boat being delivered in 2029, when we will still be years off our much costlier, inferior vessel.

Turnbull's announcement came as a surprise. At the time the French proposed to convert their nuclear-powered Barracuda design to diesel-electric propulsion (now it will be a new design). Everything about the project — cost, delivery, technology and risk — suggests it is a dud idea that dumbs down a nuclear submarine by removing the whole basis of its superior capability, and then charging at least twice as much for a far less capable vessel. When the first is delivered it will likely be obsolete. The last is due 100 years after the Nautilus put to sea.

When the Super Seasprite helicopter was cancelled after outlaying a cool $1.4bn in return for not one single helicopter that the navy could use, many wondered what the Defence Department could possibly do for an encore. We soon found out. But were this massive project to fail, the consequences for our national security are on a completely different scale and are simply unthinkable.

Dick Smith joined with me to place an advertisement in The Australian criticising the deal. Neither Defence nor government took notice. I commissioned Insight Economics to

undertake substantial research and come up with an alternative. This shows that if the government acts now it is not too late to change course. But the key message is that Australian submarines are required to operate at the highest level of intensity, even in peacetime, in an increasingly contested and congested theatre where four nations deploy nuclear submarines and where the potential adversary is pursuing a strategy of anti-access and area denial. With the size and capability of the PLA Navy increasing prodigiously, by the time the Attack class is due to enter service the intensity of submarine operations will be even greater.

Not only will a diesel submarine have less effectiveness in our area of operations than the American nuclear submarines with which we partner, but its lack of stealth while snorting and its low sustainable speed if detected threatens its survivability.

One of the most shameful episodes in our military history occurred in 1941-42 when we sent brave young Australians, with predictable results, to fight the advanced Japanese Zero fighters in obsolete aircraft. We owe our servicemen and women better than that. We are a wealthy country and have a moral obligation to provide ADF personnel with the best possible military platforms when sent into harm's way.

If we are serious about submarine operations at the highest level of intensity, we need nuclear-powered attack submarines, complemented by autonomous underwater vehicles.

If the government decides it is unwilling or unable to acquire nuclear submarines, it should consider withdrawing from such operations. But submarines are an offensive weapons system and presently provide the ADF's only substantial power projection capability. If future vessels are not up to this then perhaps we should not operate submarines at all. With Australia's vast coastline to defend, there is little value in deploying a few conventional submarines to chug around. We might be better with two squadrons of advanced bomber aircraft delivered relatively promptly at less cost. With the ongoing deterioration of Australia's strategic circumstances, we may need both nuclear submarines and long-range stealth bombers.

Of course, there are challenges involved in upgrading Australia's capabilities in nuclear science. But if the government commits to nuclear submarines then I will commit to endowing a chair in nuclear engineering in an Australian university.

Gary Johnston is the founder of Submarines for Australia. The Insight Economics report is at www.submarinesforaustralia.com.au.