

Submarines a top insurance policy

WITHOUT attempting to predict Australia's strategic environment in the period 2020-2050, it is clear that there are powerful forces at work now that are shaping Australia's future defence choices.

China and India are emerging as major global players, exercising political and economic power in pursuit of their objectives while simultaneously constraining others in the pursuit of theirs.

The global competition for resources, particularly energy (both hydrocarbon and nuclear), key strategic minerals and water is growing in strategic significance.

Australia is well endowed with energy sources. However, as Michael Wesley and Michael Richardson's recent analysis demonstrates, the trend is heading from a sensitivity to energy interruption to one of vulnerability — increasingly serious economic and strategic vulnerability.

Set against this unfolding power competition, the maritime environment is becoming more complex in both economic and strategic terms, carrying the vast majority of Australia's imports and exports. It is also becoming more demanding.

Current and planned investment in maritime capability throughout the region will give nations the capability to assert their maritime sovereignty rights, including in the undersea environment.

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is increasingly being denied to any other ADF platform. Submarines inject a huge degree of uncertainty and unknown into an adversary's calculations — where are they, what are they doing, what can they hit us with and when?

The enhancement and expansion of Australia's submarine force will confer a significant strategic deterrent capability for Australia, not only measured in defence terms but also contributing to the security of energy and raw materials supply.

Submarines offer a significant return on strategic investment. Their ability to access areas denied to other platforms, combined with their ability to concurrently observe activities underwater, on the surface, in the air and over the electromagnetic spectrum, afford it unique intelligence-gathering abilities.

This information contributes to Australian and allied knowledge, provides warning, enables us to gauge intentions, deploy diplomatic and military preparations and, in the event of a contingency, position our limited military capability for maximum effect.

A submarine fitted with land attack cruise missiles is able to position within launch range without alerting the adversary, withdraw quietly if not required, or launch on instruction and withdraw without provoking or offering an opportunity for a further engagement.

This more than fills the gap left in our capabilities by the retirement of the F-111.

The submarine's ability covertly to gain access to the denied areas and assess the environment and deployment of opposing forces, without alerting the opponent, and relay this back in order to allow future task force operations in the area can ensure that our vulnerable and critical surface vessels (such as the new landing ships and the air warfare destroyers) are not put in harm's way unnecessarily.

Australian submarines are arguably Australia's most potent anti-submarine weapon; this is their most demanding role. This capability is enhanced by the optimised sensor suite possessed by a submarine compared with all other anti-submarine platforms.

Submarines are the most valued and unique of all the capabilities we bring to the US Alliance — something the US prizes highly.

The capabilities demonstrated by our first warship lost in battle, HMAS AE2 in the Gallipoli campaign almost 100 years ago remains valid today — after the British and French battle ships were repulsed, only submarines were able to gain access. One 800-tonne Australian submarine with a crew of 32 tied up the defences in the Dardanelles, drove off a battle ship bombarding the landing beaches and disrupted sea lines resupplying the peninsula — without their courageous effort the story could well have been even bloodier and more disastrous.

Submarines constitute a unique capability, our strategic sting and an insurance policy that will enable us to predict, prepare and prevent a "claim" — a very good policy indeed for the uncertain times on the horizon.

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Submarines: A significant deterrent

Regional nations are acquiring or improving their submarine capability. India and China are acquiring advanced European and Russian submarine technology.

There is a growing regional recognition of the force multiplier effects of modern submarine forces: their capacity to enhance significantly the utility of other naval and air assets while imposing on any potential adversary a totally disproportionate cost and effort to neutralise.

In these circumstances, Australia's critical strategic problem — how to defend 20 per cent of the earth's surface with 0.3 per cent of the world's population — becomes even more poignant.

What Australia needs is the ability to inflict a strategic sting of such virulence that no one wants either to experience it, or to make the huge investment in attempting to counter it.

This ability becomes all the more important given the struggle to access the increasingly scarce and critical resources outlined above, a significant portion of which is under Australia's control.

Central to Australia's "strategic sting" is a capable submarine force.

The submarine's unique capabilities of stealth, long range and endurance provide a force projection capability that

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