

Australia's future national security could hinge on 12 new submarines
Opinion – By David Nicholls
Canberra Times
Thursday, June 4, 2020

The "new normal" for Australia's national security in a post-coronavirus-pandemic environment will see a much stronger emphasis placed on the importance of sovereign capability than ever before.

Early indications are that this need for sovereignty will extend beyond the defence industry to sectors including manufacturing and energy. But by far the most strategic sovereign asset Australia has is its current fleet of submarines - and support services to maintain and operate them - and the following Attack-class program.

The economic damage that the pandemic has caused has prompted calls for an overhaul - or in extreme circumstances, a termination - of the Attack-class submarine program, which will deliver 12 new submarines built in Adelaide.

The most frequent reason given for questioning the future submarines is the significant cost of the program to the taxpayer.

However, calls to cancel the program or reduce the capability are short-sighted, to say the least. Now, more than at any time in the past decade, Australia needs the strategic assurance offered by 12 new Attack-class submarines built in Adelaide. The new submarines should not be any less capable than the current requirements for long-range strategic deterrence.

On the issue of cost, yes, submarines are expensive - and acquisition of the new submarines deserves scrutiny given investment by government in delivering this new defence capability. But the complexity of the new boats must also not be overlooked. Former senator John Madigan hinted at this when he famously described submarines as the "spaceships of the ocean".

There will be significant benefits for all Australians from the new submarines. The Attack-class will be the most advanced sovereign capability that the Royal Australia Navy has. Indeed, the new submarines will be the most lethal capability in the Australian Defence Force, providing a future weapons system that will meet national security requirements.

Submarines provide stealth options and operational capability in areas that other military assets cannot. This is why sovereign submarine capability is directly linked with Australia's national security (submarines are an effective long-range deterrence). When the Attack-class submarines are operational, our navy will have a greater capability than the current Collins-class submarines, increasing the level of protection of Australian supply lines and further underwriting our national security.

Such is the deteriorating strategic environment in the Pacific that without 12 new submarines, the medium-term risk to Australia's national security and maritime trade will be significantly heightened. The almost daily changes in behaviour of the major powers in the region reinforce the need to develop our most strategic sovereign asset, the Australian Submarine Force, as quickly as possible.

It would be foolish to predict that it will all be smooth sailing for the design and acquisition of the new Attack-class boats. This is the largest and most difficult project that the Department of Defence has ever undertaken, and most likely the largest ever project embarked on by the Australian government. That's why there are robust public policy processes in place which are designed to keep it on track and minimise waste.

If Australia is to maintain and enhance national security as we transition from the Collins-class submarines to the Attack-class, there must be no gap in our sovereign submarine capability. Without wanting to downplay the importance of life-of-type extensions to the Collins-class submarines, switching course or cancelling the Attack-class program would expose Australia to such a gap - and this would be catastrophic for Australia's national security and maritime trade.

For Australia's national security to be adequate as the nation transitions out of the pandemic, the investment in 12 new submarines is money well spent and, by and large, there is no indication that the commencement of construction of the first of the Attack-class boats will be late. Without a strong ongoing commitment to this sovereign capability, our nation risks being far worse off.

David Nicholls is executive director of the Submarine Institute of Australia

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6779602/australias-future-national-security-could-hinge-on-12-new-submarines/>