

Australia to acquire new submarine fleet

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Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Defence Minister Stephen Smith announced on Thursday that the Australian Labor government will allocate \$214 million in its May 8 budget to the design and planning phase of plans to equip the navy with up to 12 new long-range, hunter-killer submarines over the next two decades. It will be the most expensive military procurement in the country's history, with initial cost estimates ranging from \$36 billion to \$40 billion.

As well as the acquisition of a new submarine fleet, the Labor government announced that a new defence strategic assessment "White Paper" would be prepared by the end of 2013—12 months earlier than had been expected. Peter Jennings, the executive director of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and a former senior Defence Department bureaucrat, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Lateline" program that the new White Paper was needed because of the "heating up of the strategic competition between major powers in the Asia-Pacific, particularly between China and the US." He declared that as a result of the US "pivot" to Asia, "Australia needs to do the same thing."

The US pivot into the Asia-Pacific, to which the Labor government has given unconditional support, is directly aimed at blocking any challenge by China to American geo-political dominance over the region. Canberra is now under pressure from Washington to boost the Australian armed forces so as to be able to make a significant contribution in the event of a US military confrontation with Beijing.

The military agreements signed between the Obama administration and the Labor government last November foreshadowed joint bases in the north and west of Australia and on the Cocos Islands. US-Australian naval and air operations will seek to control critical sea lanes between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. In the event of conflict, the Australian Navy would be tasked with

assisting US forces impose a naval blockade of the trade passages, cutting off China's access to essential resources, especially oil and gas from the Middle East and Africa.

Gillard told the press conference on Thursday that "in our strategic environment we need strong maritime capabilities and that's why we need a potent submarine force."

The submarine acquisition was revealed alongside announcements of overall cutbacks to defence spending, as part of Labor's commitment to the financial markets to return the budget to surplus over the next 12 months. Some \$5 billion in savings are being achieved over the next four years by deferring the purchase of American F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, cancelling several smaller projects, and imposing further civilian job cuts in the Defence Department.

The Labor government, however, has already faced intense criticism by strategic analysts, including former senior military officers, over its failure to address the deficiencies of the submarine fleet. The Navy presently has six diesel-powered Collins class submarines, which were built in Australia between 1990 and 2003 according to a unique design. While the Collins subs are the largest conventional submarines in the world and one of the longest-range, they have been plagued with technical problems since coming into service. Just one of the six is generally available for deployment, due to maintenance and staffing issues.

Washington's frustration that a key Pacific ally currently has no credible submarine fleet was made clear in February by the US ambassador to Australia, Jeffrey Bleich. In a blatant intervention into the Australian political arena, Bleich told the *Australian Financial Review* that Australian submarines were viewed in Washington as "crucial to security in the Asia-Pacific

region”. He suggested that rather than Australia undertaking a protracted construction of a new fleet, Canberra could purchase or lease American-built nuclear-powered submarines instead. “Off-the-shelf” US ships could be put into service more rapidly and would guarantee complete inter-operability with American vessels. Moreover, Bleich suggested, such an acquisition could be complemented by the construction of a new joint nuclear submarine base capable of servicing nuclear-powered vessels, giving the US Navy maintenance facilities in Australia.

Bleich’s intervention was followed by a series of calls for Labor to abandon plans to construct new submarines in Australia and purchase US nuclear submarines. Greg Sheridan, the foreign affairs editor for the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper was especially vociferous—in March he described the Collins class subs as “among the greatest fiascos of our defence history” and labelled Defence Minister Smith a “fatal procrastinator” who would not make a decision on their replacement. On April 20, an *Australian* editorial endorsed Bleich’s and Sheridan’s stance, declaring that the Gillard government “should consider the cost benefits of purchasing nuclear-powered Virginia-class submarines from the US” and that it “must not neglect its responsibility to provide for frontline defence any longer.”

Thursday’s announcement is certain to provoke further controversy and recriminations. Gillard declared that the new vessels would be diesel-electric and that they would be largely constructed or at least assembled at Australia’s only remaining naval ship-building facility in South Australia. She declared the government’s decision to be a “boon” to the South Australian manufacturing industry. Labor has repeatedly ruled out acquiring US nuclear-powered vessels, primarily due to widespread public suspicion toward nuclear power of any kind. The opposition Liberal and National parties led by Tony Abbott, equally conscious of popular opposition and anxious to win Labor-held seats in South Australia at the next election, have also distanced themselves from the calls for nuclear subs.

According to the timetable provided by the Labor government, the design phase will continue to 2017. Even if schedules are kept, the first of the new submarines would not be available for operations until 2027 and the entire fleet would not be completed until 2034 at the

earliest. Given that the ill-fated Collins class fleet is scheduled to go out of service between 2025 and 2031, the timetable implies that the Australian Navy will lack a fully functioning submarine capability for the next 19 years—and none at all until the first of the new vessels is ready.

One of the most likely options for the new long-range conventional submarine is the Type 216 U-Boat, a design by Germany ship-builder HDW that upgrades the proven capabilities of a smaller model, the Type 214. HDW claims to have conceived of the vessel with the requirements of countries like Australia, Canada and India in mind. It has been touted as a match for US and Russian nuclear submarines and received favourable reviews in naval journals, particularly for its ability to launch cruise missiles and remain submerged for weeks in “crisis areas like the Straits of Malacca.”

Another possibility that has been canvassed is the purchase of the Japanese Soryu submarine class, the first of which went into service in 2009. They were designed specifically to hunt down and destroy China’s nuclear missile-armed submarines.

The long delays in bringing such submarines into service in the Australian navy are unlikely to be acceptable to the Obama administration and are already provoking further criticism from sections of the Australian political and military establishment. An editorial in yesterday’s *Australian*, titled “An indefensible record of neglecting defence policy”, fired off another volley, accusing the government of failing to deliver on its previous promises, dismissing plans for Australian-built submarines, and hinting that Defence Minister Stephen Smith should be sacked.



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