

Australian Labor Party demands faster development of attack submarines

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The opposition Australian Labor Party (ALP) has condemned the Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison for delays in the construction of 12 new attack submarines.

The Australian National Audit Office released a report on January 14 into the submarine project, titled “Future Submarine Program—Transition to Design.” It reported that the project’s initial design phase is now nine months behind schedule. This comes after testimony in Senate estimates hearings last November that revealed planned construction of the first submarine has been delayed by a year. The accumulating delays have pushed back the scheduled operational activation of the submarine fleet from the original forecast of the mid-2020s to the current expectation that the first submarines will not be ready until the mid-2030s.

This delay is so substantial that it threatens a submarine “gap,” with several years potentially separating the mothballing of the current, ageing Collins-class submarine fleet and the deployment of the new long-range attack submarine fleet.

Amid escalating geo-strategic tensions that are being fuelled by US imperialism’s aggressive confrontation of China, this threat to Australia’s global submarine capacity has raised alarm bells within the military and intelligence establishment.

The Labor Party is giving full throated voice to these concerns. While the opposition has closed ranks behind the government over the nation-wide bushfire crisis, refusing to criticise Prime Minister Scott Morrison and his government for its indifference to the suffering of working class communities, on this issue of “national security” the Labor Party is keen to burnish its militarist credentials.

Richard Marles, deputy leader of the Labor Party and

opposition defence spokesman, wrote an op-ed piece for the *Australian* on January 16 headlined “Australia needs these submarines—how late will they be?”

Marles boasted: “The decision to acquire 12 long-range submarines was first made by the Rudd Labor government. In a world characterised by uncertainty this is a vital acquisition for our nation. Submarines have capabilities unlike any other platform. They project Australian defence in a unique way. They are one of the most strategic assets Australia has. And this is the most expensive Defence acquisition in our nation’s history. Labor totally supports the Future Submarine Program and Australia cannot afford to see it fail in any way.”

While Marles did not spell out the possible role for the new submarines, it is openly acknowledged within foreign policy think tanks and defence industry publications that one of their crucial tasks in the event of a US-led war with China will be cutting off crucial naval trade and military passageways in South East Asia, including the strategic Malacca, Lombok and Sunda straits.

Australia’s attack submarines are designed to be fully “interoperable” with US forces, and will, in other words, be integrated into US military strategy. The submarine “megaproject” is directly bound up with ensuring Australian imperialism’s global interests in the event of war between the US and its great power rivals.

The Labor Party is seeking to conceal these issues before ordinary people, promoting submarine construction as a purely defensive measure.

In his op-ed, Marles described as “breathtaking” the Australian National Audit Office report detailing of the mounting problems at every stage of the submarine project. This had prompted a warning in 2018 by the

chairman of the government's Naval Shipbuilding Advisory Board, former US Navy secretary Don Winter, that an assessment should be made whether the project's "risks outweighed the benefits of proceeding."

Marles, outraged at any suggestion that the submarines' construction not proceed, thundered: "This is a moment when every Australian concerned about the defence of our nation should be aghast at how the Future Submarine Program is being managed by this government. Yet, with all of these red flags, where is the [defence] minister?"

Notably, the Labor Party has said not one word of criticism as the cost of the submarine construction project escalates ever higher than the original \$50 billion estimate. In Senate estimates hearings last November, military officials revealed that the build would now cost at least \$80 billion, with another \$145 billion to maintain and upgrade the twelve submarines until the year 2080.

During the estimates hearings, Labor Senator Kimberley Kitching raised no objections to the extraordinary expenditure. Instead, she grilled the government about whether nuclear-powered submarines had been considered. Minister for Defence Linda Reynolds insisted that, "Australia doesn't have the qualified personnel, experience, infrastructure, training facilities and regulatory systems required to design, construct, operate and maintain a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines."

Responding to Kitching's questions, Reynolds said, "are you saying you and the Labor Party would like a nuclear-powered submarine?" The Labor senator refused to answer this, saying only, "You are the government, minister. That's a discussion probably best had in another place."

In 2012, shortly after the Labor government announced the plan to construct 12 new submarines, Jeffrey Bleich, the US ambassador to Australia, publicly declared that Washington regarded Australian submarines as "crucial to security in the Asia-Pacific region." He urged the purchase of American-built nuclear vessels. The blatant intervention into Australian domestic politics underscored what is at stake for Washington in the still unresolved question of how the new submarine fleet will be acquired and sustained.

The consistent position of the Labor Party has been to

advance itself as the most determined advocate of a vast expansion of Australia's military forces, marching in lockstep alongside Washington as it prepares for regional and even global war.



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