LESSONS FROM FAILURES

Less blue-sky innovation, more basics

Before ambitious defence planning contemplates the future beyond Collins-class submarines, it needs a reality check

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THERE is something surreal about the government's plans for our future submarines. The defence white paper calls for a fleet of 12 submarines, each considerably larger and more sophisticated than what we have now.

In fact, they will be the largest and most complex conventional submarines attempted in human history and the likely cost is being kept secret (hardly reassuring), but an independent estimate puts the bill at more than $30 billion.

Yet — and this is what makes things surreal — we cannot properly crew or reliably make available the six Collins-class submarines we have now.

At best, only two vessels are available for operations, and despite almost a decade since the first boat was supposed to enter service, and a cost estimated at $10bn of taxpayers' money, the submarines are only now slowly being brought up to their original specifications.

Given the troubles with the Collins venture, what makes anyone think a more ambitious program is remotely credible? It can't be because the submarines are an isolated example.

Consider the Seasprite helicopter debacle.

What is not widely appreciated is that New Zealand ordered five Seasprites about the same time we did, but while we pursued a custom refurbishment of old airframes to meet our requirements, they bought new aircraft off the shelf.

Its aircraft cost $65 million each and are in service today. Ours cost $100m each and we have nothing to show for it.

Then there was the fiasco of Project Echidna, which sought to design and build a bespoke radar warning receiver for Australian Defence Force aircraft in the 1990s. Ten years and $100m later, the project has been abandoned.

It's just part of the ongoing scandalous failure to equip ADF aircraft with the self-protection systems they need.

It's been almost eight years since our troops first deployed to Afghanistan and we are still unable to send Blackhawk helicopters to support them.

The list goes on. There's the frequency modernisation project that's trying to revamp our military high-frequency communications.

It's running more than three years behind schedule and will now equip far fewer platforms than originally planned, although the $673m price tag has not changed.

Meanwhile, satellite technology is steadily rendering HF communications more obsolete by the day. This project will deliver yesterday's technology tomorrow.

Let's not forget the lightweight torpedo project. Somehow it was decided to replace our US-sourced anti-submarine torpedoes with a new European weapon at a cost of $616m and 10 years later, attempts to integrate the European torpedo on to our aircraft and helicopters have been abandoned. And although the torpedoes can still be used from our surface vessels, they are of questionable utility given the far superior range of larger torpedoes carried by submarines.

Only space prohibits the listing of further examples. Nonetheless, the point should be clear: past practice has wasted billions of dollars and left many of our defence capabilities in a decidedly poor state. And the problem is not a lack of money. Since 2000 funding has been so generous that Defence has handed back billions of dollars it simply could not spend.

Rather, the problem is that we have repeatedly sought customised military capabilities that are beyond the technical and managerial ability of Defence and industry to deliver.

So what should be done? So far, the government has approached the problems of defence systematically.

It has reviewed defence procurement, audited the defence budget, published a defence white paper and planned a defence reform program, and while this is a good start, it does not guarantee success.

Defence has weathered past reforms, and it will do so again unless the government takes charge.

As a start, it should put the kibosh on developmental defence projects unless they are absolutely unavoidable.

The default should be to buy proven equipment from established production lines, such as the Abrams tanks and C-17 aircraft that we quickly and successfully acquired recently from the US.

To underline a firm commitment to avoiding technological overreach, the government should narrow the scope of the Defence Science and Technology Organisation.

We need less blue-sky innovation and more basic engineering. There's certainly plenty of room for improving the latter.

Consider the confusion over the structural integrity of the F-111 and F/A-18 aircraft.

More than $440m was spent integrating a new stand-off missile on to the F-111 just in time to be told that the aircraft had to be retired earlier than planned.

The opposite occurred with the F/A-18: $250m was spent on developing a structural refurbishment package to extend its life before discovering the work was largely unnecessary.

Of course, buying equipment off the shelf is not a panacea. There will be times when it's worth taking the risk of trying to tailor solutions to meet our particular circumstances. Although some would disagree, a credible argument can be mounted that the replacement submarines fall into this category.

It is certainly the case that existing submarine designs fall well short of the navy's aspirations.

But before embarking on son of Collins, the government needs to convince the public (and itself) that the yawning gap between today's performance and tomorrow's plans can be closed.

Here's what to do: the government should respond to the ongoing adverse publicity surrounding the Collins-class and ASC (the government-owned firm that built and maintains the boats) by making a clear statement disclosing all the problems presently faced and saying how and when they will be fixed.

Then it should make clear to the navy that the number and type of new submarines will depend critically on the number of Collins-class boats it has fully crewed, fully equipped and ready to deploy when the final decision is taken next decade.

For this reason, an entirely off-the-shelf submarine design must be retained as a parallel option as the project develops.

Such an approach would inject some sorely needed reality into defence planning by making future plans dependent on present performance.

The alternative is to charge ahead based on little more than blithe promises that we'll somehow get it right next time.

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