

Running Silent – ASW in the ADF

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Early in the Falklands War in May 1982, the (British) Royal Navy hunter-killer submarine HMS *Conqueror* sank the Argentine Navy cruiser ARA *Belgrano*. Three hundred and twenty-three lives were lost, half of all Argentines who died during the conflict. For the rest of the war Argentina's admirals dared not let their fleet venture more than a few kilometres from their home ports. In effect, an entire navy had been defeated by a single action.

In terms of creating a strategic effect, nothing has changed since then. Submarines continue to represent one of the most potent capabilities a defence force can operate.

The corollary is that any defence force that needs to protect sea lines of communications will risk failure if it lacks a credible anti-submarine warfare capability. Nowhere does this apply more than in Australia.

It should be self-evident that, as an island continent, Australia is a maritime nation. Australia is one of the world's largest importers/exporters, with 83 per cent by value of all goods being moved by sea. Even more significant is the fact that 85 per cent of all oil is imported by sea, either as crude for local refineries, or as refined petrol, diesel and jet fuel. Those are compelling numbers. Stop maritime trade and you stop Australia.

It is a matter of concern that over the past twenty years the Australian Defence Force's ASW capabilities – which are hard won and easily lost - have been allowed to degrade in both the RAN and the RAAF.

Before discussing the reasons, the growth of submarine forces in the Asia-Pacific warrants comment. That growth is one of the region's most striking military developments.

Within ten years there is likely to be some 160 submarines in the Asia-Pacific, many of which will be new and highly capable. Leading the charge, unsurprisingly, is China, whose shipyards are already building 2-3 boats per year, and which by 2025 may have as many as 75 on its orbit. Types include nuclear-powered attack boats, ballistic missile launchers, land- and maritime-strike missile launchers, and advanced diesel electric boats specialising in intelligence collection and surface ship attack.

Other nations modernising and expanding their submarine forces include India, Pakistan, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and (we hope) Australia.

One of the ADF's problems has been the diversion of the RAAF's AP-3C maritime patrol wing onto land surveillance operations to support the war in Afghanistan. This is of course a matter of priorities, and if the soldiers fighting the Taliban need that support then it must be provided. The point here simply is that having to sustain two aircraft and their crews in the Middle East has been a large drain on the wing, and has come at a cost to other roles.

The issue of platform numbers will arise again in several years when the eighteen AP-3Cs are replaced by eight P-8As. While the P-8As will be more capable, basic numbers cannot be ignored. For example, past operations have required four AP-3Cs to continuously track a

Russian nuclear-powered submarine for an extended period. Allowing for aircraft undergoing maintenance, or allocated to training and other tasks, the entire AP-3C force would probably be needed to prosecute two nuclear-powered submarines simultaneously. The smaller P-8A force, however, is likely to be limited to one target only.

Turning to the Navy, one of the best ASW assets a fleet can have is helicopters using dipping sonar to generate rapid submarine tracking data. Yet the RAN has lacked this critical capability since its Sea King helicopters were withdrawn from ASW operations in 1990. The introduction of twenty-four MH-60R Seahawks in 2014 will finally redress this deficiency, but in the meantime a generation of RAN Aviation Warfare Officers has grown up without regular exposure to dipping sonar.

Finally, there is the problem of the RAN's submarines themselves. Because of the well-documented technical problems experienced by the Collins-class boats, all components of the ADF's ASW force – surface ships, submarines, fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, and command and control centres – which rely on the Collins fleet to act as the 'enemy' during exercises - have had their training time and experience constrained.

In the opinion of some specialists, it could take the ADF around ten years to regain the level of ASW expertise it had at the end of the 1980s, and which it will need to be credible in the coming decades. Moreover, the situation will only improve if new platforms arrive on time and in sufficient numbers, crews are available, training time is allocated, regular exercises are held, and the capability is treated as a system and not as separate components.

For more than twenty years ASW in the ADF has been running silent. Developments in the region make it clear that this vital capability must be restored as a matter of priority.