All the way with USA the smart move for Australia

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For a country in a predominantly maritime region where the tyranny of distance is unrelenting and with foreign adversaries sharing your oceans, the strategic decision to acquire nuclear-powered submarines (known as SSNs) is the right one for Australia and its alliance network.

As a former US secretary of the navy, I oversaw the US Navy's decision to spend $US22bn to purchase nine new Virginia-class submarines. The US is continuing to invest in this program because the technology behind SSNs is an increasingly important naval asset in the ever-changing maritime combat landscape.

It also should be noted that within the navy and the US Department of Defence the Virginia-class submarine program is one of the most successful acquisition programs in terms of cost/performance and delivery. Australia's decision on which type of SSN to procure will be critical. The Virginia-class is better for Australia's national security mission, is more interoperable and is likelier to fill the capability gap earlier with proven manufacture and sustainment costs.

The Royal Australian Navy needs a submarine with diverse capabilities. An Australian SSN needs to deter foreign adversaries from attacking vital sea lines of communication and trade, to perform intelligence gathering and processing missions, and to be able to interdict foreign vessels in Australia's backyard. There is no better option than the Virginia-class for these purposes.

The Virginia-class carries more weapons than any other industry counterpart. The new payload module increases the capacity of torpedoes and missiles from 37 to 65. The American submarine

also has a Tomahawk missile vertical launching system, which pairs nicely with Australia's recent announcement that it will purchase more Tomahawk missiles from the US.

With this suite of weaponry, adversaries will think twice before targeting Australian sea routes.

On the intel and interdiction side, the Virginia-class is equipped with the best sensory and detection tools available on the market.

One key point for the RAN to consider is the closeness of the US and Australian navies, and the deep ties between the US-Australian defence industrial bases. This interoperability in the military and private sector will result in a better submarine for Australia's needs. Australia's defence experts have said much of the same.

A paper about which SSN would be best for Australia, presented at the Submarine Institute of Australia by Commander John Thornton (ret), a specialist in nuclear submarine engineering, says: "The most capable submarine undoubtedly will be the Virginia-class, followed by the Astute-class." It also highlights the RAN's "close involvement with the US Navy" and the ASC's "close relationship" with General Dynamics, manufacturer of the Virginia-class submarine.

It is important to remember the much maligned French submarine deal was partially cancelled because of concerns over the lack of shared culture and vision for the project. There is little danger of a similar culture clash if Australia builds American submarines. This is especially true if the US and Australia begin joint training exercises on in-service US Virginia-class submarines as soon as possible. This will expedite the build out of the RAN's submariner force and capacity. Training can start now.

Defence experts have rightly raised questions about the RAN's short-term capability gap. This gap refers to the time before Australia captains its new fleet of submarines, while the foreign naval threat continues to grow. These experts also rightly estimate that the decision to procure SSNs means Australia will not have new submarines until 2040. In the decision between the Virginia-class and other options, Australia will have to consider which submarine can be delivered sooner.

As stated earlier, the Virginia-class program qualifies as some of the best-spent dollars for performance in the US Navy. Besides the billions invested in Virginia, the RAN would benefit from the tens of millions of hours expended on development of this vessel and the production efficiencies from the long-travelled learning curves since the early 2000s.

These facts clearly argue that by choosing Virginia, Australia will fill its capability gap with a proven design, robust production and supply chain, within known cost curves, quicker than other alternatives. These benefits not only provide the RAN an efficient build program but equally, if not more important, a manageable and predictable sustainment program supported by historical data.

One of the better decisions made during the birth of Virginia was the contracting of two yards to provide redundant manufacturing capabilities. Australia's ability to produce Virginia can be increased in early years by prefabrication of specific modules in these yards. As infrastructure and talent grow, over time production can shift completely to Australia.

There are many hurdles yet to overcome, but the US Navy, Department of Defence and Department of Energy all understand the chain of command. If President Joe Biden and congress show their continued strong support for our major ally squaring off in the Indo-Pacific we will have a path forward.

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