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A logical decision on a warship that should be moved to a grey area

The Sydney Morning Herald

14 February 2005

P. 13

Some time very soon the Defence Department will ask the Prime Minister and his colleagues to decide who is going to design and build three new destroyers for the navy. This is a serious business, because we are talking real money — \$6 billion plus.

But before ministers get down to the detail of comparing one bid against another, they should ask Defence an even more serious question: why exactly are we buying these new destroyers in the first place?

Big grey ships are such an icon of national power that the logic of building them seems self-evident. But a country of Australia's size, in a region like ours, cannot afford to be sentimental or simplistic. Ministers need to be sure that this is the most cost-effective way to spend the billions needed to build the ships, and billions more to maintain and operate them for decades to come.

That question has never been addressed by ministers, nor indeed by Defence. The destroyers were included in the 2000 Defence White Paper as replacements for the navy's frigates. The logic was that simple: we've had ships like this in the past, therefore we will need them in the future.

That is hardly an adequate basis for spending \$6 billion, and it will seem even worse when ministers look closely at what they are being asked to buy. The proposed ships look nothing like those they are replacing. For a start they will be much bigger. At 6000 tonnes — and possibly more — these would be bigger than any frigate, destroyer or cruiser the navy has commissioned since World War II.

There is a trend here. The navy is also trying to talk the Government into buying amphibious ships that are bigger than the old aircraft carrier, HMAS Melbourne.

But the destroyers are not just big; they are complex. These ships are called air warfare destroyers (AWDs in defence-speak) because their main task is to defend themselves and other ships from air attack. To do that they have a powerful radar and anti-aircraft missiles, as well as a lot of other sophisticated systems, all of which have to be made to work together. These will be by far the most complex warships we have ever built.

Why would we want such a ship? The Government has never given a comprehensive answer, but the brief comments in the Defence Minister's press releases say the ships are needed to protect amphibious deployments of land forces.

Fair enough: if Australia ever finds itself deploying an amphibious task group against a capable adversary in a major conventional conflict, it would be very important to protect them from air attack. But do we need air warfare destroyers to do that?

As long as our ships were operating within range of our own or allied air bases, our fighters would be much more effective in defending the fleet from air attack than the air warfare destroyers. And bombing enemy aircraft on the ground before they take off would be even better. So wouldn't it be more cost-effective to spend our money on more aircraft, which could do this job better, and could also do many other important jobs as well?

With a bit of imagination you can conjure scenarios in which our fighters might not be able to help — if our ships were operating beyond the range of our land-based aircraft, for example.

But a glance at the map shows that these scenarios are pretty few and remote. It makes no sense to spend big money on expensive ships that we need only in remote scenarios, when we are short of funds for much higher priorities like more army battalions, new land-based anti-aircraft missiles, and an adequate number of new fighter aircraft.

The Government sometimes suggests that the air warfare destroyers may provide ballistic missile defences. It is true they could be upgraded to shoot down ballistic missiles, but only relatively short-range ones. The longer-range missiles that could pose a threat to Australian cities would be out of its reach. And we would need to ask why it makes sense to put a missile defence capability on a ship which in a crisis might well be deployed elsewhere, or could be sunk by a mine or a submarine.

So ministers need to do some serious due diligence on the decision they are about to take. Why is buying these ships the most cost-effective investment we can make in our security? The answer better not be that it is good for the naval shipbuilding industry, or for the states where the ships might be built. That would be the tail wagging the dog in a big way.

It will be awkward to start asking these questions now, because the process of buying the destroyers is well advanced. But better late than never. And a decision to scrap the project now could save a lot of pain later.

Because even if ministers decide they like the look of the air warfare destroyers, the way the building of the ships is being managed reminds some of us of the worst aspects of the Collins submarine project. But that is a whole different story.

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