

Australia's French Connection and the Submarine Saga. France, Military Supplier for Royal Australian Navy

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It was all a funny business, but it is very clear that the Australian relationship with France, at least when it comes to matters of defence, has changed over the years. From being belligerents keen to pursue nuclear testing in the Pacific, to being “cheese eating surrender monkeys” prior to the Coalition of the Confused’s attack on Iraq in 2003, France has stormed into fashion as a military supplier for the Royal Australian Navy.

The French military industrial complex, involving heavy state direction and motivated by Colbert’s principles of dirigisme, has long been one of the most active in terms of economic activity. Even as the French economy sags in tired despair, the selling of arms has proven lucrative. In the business of producing the machines of death, the French do splendidly. In recent times, it has done spectacularly so, with defence contracts with a string of Arab countries, and India.

What of the wicked Frenchman stereotype of the Pacific, flaunting his military hardware? Some Australians would remember the reaction to the 1996 nuclear tests in French Polynesia, when there were boycotts of French goods. (Sales of BeBoeuf Beujolais particularly suffered.) Matters were similarly hostile over the destruction of Greenpeace’s Rainbow Warrior in 1985 by French commandos, and the seizure of the Rainbow Warrior II and MV Greenpeace after crossing the French-imposed 12-mile exclusion zone imposed around the Moruroa test site.

Fewer would remember the longevity of the French-Australian defence relationship, stretching back to the defence contracts of the 1960s, when the French Dassault Mirage III replaced US Sabre jet fighters over the problematic Lockheed F-104 Starfighter.

In 2014, it seemed that Japan would thunder forth with the offer the then Abbott government wanted: a contract to build 12 or so submarines. But the Japanese group failed to confirm that it would boost local skilled jobs in Australia, even as it was being outmanoeuvred by German and French contenders. Industrial partners in the defence side of things were few and far between, and Japan’s diplomats were caught asleep. The French, in particular, smelt a catch, employing Sean Costello, the CEO of the Australian branch of the French defence contractor DCNS, to dangle the line in front of Canberra. In November 2014, DCNS CEO Herve Guillou convinced French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian to visit Australia. In Albany, French and Australian officials congregated to commemorate the first sailing of Australian soldiers to France in the First World War.

A \$50 billion contract duly followed, and will see 12 French-designed submarines from DCNS (of which 62 per cent is owned by the French government) supplied to the RAN. A few French media sources, notably *Le Parisien*, even went so far as to call it “the contract of the century”, showing how easy it is to catch the bug of comforting militarism.[1] Some good deal of breast-beating followed, suggesting that the genius of French industry was behind the triumph. Forget the Germans, and the Japanese – the French can do just as well.

Timing on such occasions is everything, and French ceremonial acknowledgement should not be understated. This year marks the centennial since Anzac (Australian and New Zealand Corps) troops were first deployed to the Western Front in the murderous trenches of the First World War. The Australian Governor General, who is the putative representative of the Queen as Australia’s head of state, was wined and dined with keen interest.

The French have every reason to cheer about this. President François Hollande can argue that he brought home the bacon for a much needed economic boost. It has been predicted that thousands of jobs will be created in Cherbourg, Nantes and Lorient (all in all 4,000). Dirigisme has worked again. The return to Australia, for seeking out a contract of minimal worth in security, but considerable cost to the budget, will be far poorer. History will record it as one of the most expensive public endeavours in Australian history, and a risky one at that.

Submarine projects have a habit of being bungling in execution and costly in consequence. Spain’s S-80 Isaac Peral Submarine, hailed initially as the most advanced non-nuclear submarine in the world, cost \$680 million and was found to be 75 to 100 tons overweight. According to the good engineers at Navantia, the firm responsible for what the Spanish Ministry of Defence called “deviations”, such a difference was critical enough to prevent resurfacing after submergence.[2]

No matter the risks, says Turnbull. This is the traditional bribe needed for his government ahead of an election to shore up votes in South Australia, which is still being promised an indigenous component to the submarine construction. More to the point, it is being sold as a sovereign Australian venture, despite the previous disasters of the Collins submarine program.

In so doing, it also eases matters with the Chinese – if only for the one basic fact that the defence contract did not go to Japan. Tokyo has been making militaristic murmurings for some time, hoping that such an arrangement would boost its defence industry. Hideaki Watanabe, head of the Ministry of Defence’s procurement agency, dejectedly announced that, “We will do a thorough analysis of what impact the result will have on our defence industry.”[3]

Costello is bubbling with enthusiasm. “We set them up in Australia with French technology. We transfer that fully into the company and we require that supporting company in Australia to go on and further develop a bigger business ... so that they can in turn come back to support us. So there’s a virtuous cycle that is developed.”

However much a marriage Le Drian deems it, much can change over the course of 50 years.[4] The most important point will be whether the submarines even work. History, on that score, has not smiled favourably on Australian endeavours in that regard.

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