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Netherlands aiming high on defense

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USPA NEWS - In the prospect of replacing its submarine fleet, the Netherlands have committed a sizable budget. But throwing money at the project will not suffice: if submarine programs are always expensive, spending money is the easy part - getting the best value for said money is hard.

Through Defense Minister Ank Bijleveld and State Secretary Barbara Visser, the decision has been made in the Dutch government to renew the submarine fleet, with a planned launch of the program in 2021. No financial details have emerged yet as to the amount which will be committed to the program (they are expected once the final negotiations are carried out), but the Netherlands are in the upper half of EU defense budgets, and the Netherlands are a long-standing naval power, so relevant funds should be committed. In past years, the current fleet of Dutch subs (4 home-built Walrus-class produced from the 1990s) have proven very valuable to NATO operations, namely in surveillance and hunting for subs, against Russian incursions. Presumably, Amsterdam wishes to maintain its current level of naval power and will be ambitious in its submarine program. Now, it needs to find the suitable partner for the project.

Much has been happening in past years on the small global market of sub producers. Nuclear subs are no longer the only path to the future, with considerable technological development in the diesel-electric segment in recent years. However, the level of complexity which submarine technology has now reached has caused several shipyards to simply gas out in their ability to implement it. Several embarrassing developments have occurred in shipyards over the past decade, showing how fewer and fewer engineering firms had managed to keep up with the technological race. Spanish officials sheepishly confessed in 2013 that their new state-of-the-art submarine had buoyancy problems and wouldn't float. German shipyards have racked multiple errors in recent warship production have gravely hindered Germany's naval power, with record lows in warship availability.

The reason why it is so difficult for countries with high naval ambitions to find suitable defense partners, is that submarine building doesn't amount to simply producing a unit and welding it together. Defense specialist Charlie Furrer writes: "Building a machine as complex as a [...] submarine presents massive technological challenges, and requires a vast distribution of effort to complete. Dozens of critical systems must work together to ensure both the safety of the crew and the efficacy of the [...] submarine as a whole." [?] A program must be managed from every angle, from beginning to end, lest cracks form in the project, and the ship's performance and availability will suffer, thus dragging down the nation's naval power. A properly built submarine, for instance, but with unavailable maintenance later on, is considered a program failure. Choosing an experienced project leader will therefore be vital to the Dutch Navy.

Because partnerships are often used for building various parts of the ship before assembly, integration is an additional risk. Submarine programs often require thousands of subcontractors, with as many parts to be fitted into a very small space. National security analyst Loren Thompson writes: "The Virginia class has been America's only active submarine construction program for about ten years now, but it barely gets noticed outside the Navy and the communities where it is built because it has unfolded so smoothly that there is little basis for controversy. That's an amazing feat considering the complexity of the processes involved in assembling the subs -- there are 4,000 suppliers -- and the unforgiving environment in which they are destined to operate." [?] Here again, a submarine program will fail, even if all parts are properly produced, but improperly integrated - a risk which is heightened if the buying country has no submarine capacity of its own - as is the case with the Netherlands. A very strong grip on the supply chain, preferably recently exercised through recent collaboration, is a necessary condition to the success of the Dutch submarine program.

But the biggest bet is on technology, which must be state-of-the-art, and properly mastered. Any submarine program, including the Dutch one, is a gamble: if the technology is solid, the nation will rule the seas across the world and considerably increase its strategic power. If it isn't, the ship will quickly be beaten, or sunk, and billions will be lost. The most recent developments in submarine capacities are land attack, diver deployment, all-around detection and stealth capacities and range. So far, 4 contenders are said to be running for the deal: French Naval Group, a one-off partnership between Dutch engineering firm Damen and Swedish firm Saab, Spanish Navantia, and German shipyards TKMS. Damen has no experience in submarine-building, but hope to come back on the market; and Saab did sell one submarine program to Australia thirty years ago. TKMS has a long experience in submarine building but the most recent produced units have been so plagued with defects in engineering and production that they are considered

unseaworthy. Navantia is still recovering from its last blunder.

There are probably few volumes in the world with such high technological densities as in a submarine: after spending nearly 30 years navigating among the best submarines in the world, the Dutch know what submarines can add to a country's international standing. But the Netherlands need to be careful: committing reasonable budgets doesn't automatically add up to receiving a good warship. Any shipyard in the world will take the allocated budget. But how many can actually deliver a ship so good that it will decently replace the Walrus and maintain the Netherlands military power?

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