

Australia considers German submarine option as tensions with French company grow

Exclusive by defence correspondent [Andrew Greene](#)

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TKMS bid for the original submarine construction contract that was won by a French company. (Supplied: TKMS)

The Navy has begun quietly examining whether German-made submarines could provide an interim capability for Australia before a future \$90 billion French-designed fleet is due to enter service in over a decade.

The Defence Department is also considering several other drastic options, including faster upgrades to Australia's existing Collins Class fleet, which would mean lucrative submarine maintenance work would likely remain in Adelaide.

Department sources said Navy's Director-General of Submarines, Commodore Timothy Brown, recently began a preliminary study of Type 214 submarines manufactured by German company TKMS, although Defence is refusing to confirm or deny the activity.

The Type 214 is a diesel-electric submarine operated by several navies, including South Korea, Portugal and Greece, but does not meet Australia's full requirements for a future fleet to eventually replace the ageing Collins Class submarines.

One Defence figure, who spoke to the ABC on the condition of anonymity, said Commodore Brown's scoping study was being conducted solely by the Navy and separate from the department's Capability and Sustainment Group

Key points:

- A French designed fleet is due to begin entering service in the 2030s
- The Defence Department is refusing to confirm or deny whether a senior naval officer is examining the Type 214 submarine produced by Germany's TKMS
- Another confidential Defence review has recommended more research into drone submarines and bringing forward upgrades to Australia's existing Collins Class fleet

(CASG), which oversees Australia's military acquisitions.

It is understood Commodore Brown is exploring if it would be possible for the Navy to modify a Type 214 submarine for Australian purposes, well ahead of when the future French submarines are expected to be delivered.



The Type 214 is a diesel-electric submarine operated by navies in South Korea, Portugal and Greece.

A spokesman for the Defence Department refused to say whether Commodore Brown had been tasked with exploring possible German submarine options for the Australian Navy.

"Defence remains steadfastly committed to building a regionally superior Future Submarine capability in South Australia, with the backing of a strong sovereign defence industry," the spokesperson told the ABC.

In 2016, Germany's TKMS unsuccessfully bid to design and build Australia's future submarine fleet, a \$90 billion defence contract that was eventually awarded to France's Naval Group company (then known as DCNS), which also beat another proposal from the Japanese government.

Over recent months, federal government frustrations with Naval Group have grown and there are concerns inside Defence that Australia may need a new submarine capability well before the first of the French-designed submarines is scheduled to enter service in the mid-2030s.

Independent senator Rex Patrick, a long-term critic of Naval Group, has welcomed the Navy's apparent renewed interest in what possible options Germany's TKMS could provide to Australia.

"I have been advocating a Plan B for our Navy for some time; this project is just too important to national security to not have one," he said.

"There are many capabilities in the Type 214 that far exceed the capabilities of the Collins Class submarines."

Submarine drones and Collins Class upgrades being investigated

Another confidential Defence study, led by the Chief of Joint Operations, is believed to have recommended other submarine options, such as more funding for research into unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs), and bringing forward comprehensive upgrades to the Collins Class fleet known as life-of-type-extension (LOTE).

Last year, then-defence minister Linda Reynolds tasked Vice-Admiral Jonathan Mead to conduct a "classified capability enhancement review" to examine all of Australia's existing naval platforms and current projects.

A source familiar with Admiral Mead's review said he recommended the government considered bringing forward the first planned LOTE of a Collins Class submarine from 2026 to 2024, meaning five submarines would be comprehensively upgraded by 2032, well before the first future submarine hits the water.

Federal government figures have conceded if the recommendation was accepted it would likely kill off Western Australia's push to take lucrative submarine maintenance work known as "full cycle dockings" away from South Australia.

Senator Reynolds had promised to make a decision on full-cycle dockings last December, but the continuing delays are dampening expectations in Western Australia that the state can snatch the work.

On Wednesday, a Senate estimates hearing was told a decision on LOTE would be made in June, but the Finance Minister did not commit to a date on a decision on full cycle dockings.

Other recommendations by Admiral Mead are believed to include more comprehensive upgrades to Australia's Anzac class warships and placing canister missiles on Offshore Patrol Vessels.