

Reports by Usman Ansari

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USA LIFTS BAN ON KIWI SHIPS

Washington has lifted a ban on New Zealand naval vessels visiting US naval and coast guard bases around the world.

The ban was imposed 26 years ago due to a stand-off over nuclear issues. New Zealand declared itself a nuclear free zone and banned port visits by US Navy warships that were nuclear-propelled and/or armed with atomic weapons.

It represented a breach of the ANZUS Treaty (signed between the USA, Australia, and New Zealand) curtailing bilateral military co-operation.

Despite New Zealand maintaining its long held anti-nuclear stance, it is hoped lifting the USA's ban will make it easier for the two nations to co-operate in the defence and security fields. The change comes in the wake of a number of important developments, not least the agreement in July that both nations would hold regular high-level talks on maritime security, counter-terrorism, and peace-keeping operations. US Marine Corps (USMC) personnel trained in New Zealand in July, and the RNZN also sent a sizeable contingent to participate in RIMPAC 2012.

With the USA involved in a major strategic pivot, which turns its attention away from the Cold War era focus on the Atlantic, to Asia-Pacific, accessing New Zealand bases for training and potential forward deployment of vessels is a logical step. Conversely, with Australia and other Asia-Pacific nations locking into new strategic defence arrangements with the USA, New Zealand surely wants to be part of the new security structure.

CHINA FOR RIMPAC 2014?

During a visit by US Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta to China it was announced the Chinese fleet would be invited to send a warship to RIMPAC 2014.

It is hoped the invitation will help ease tensions and potential for misunderstandings and conflict between the two Pacific powers. Secretary Panetta was the first ever civilian head of the US military to visit the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN's) North Sea Fleet headquarters. According to a US DoD spokesperson he even went aboard a Chinese frigate and submarine.

There was not an immediate 'yes' to the RIMPAC invite, a PLAN spokesman restricting himself to saying: "This message is quite positive. So we will carefully consider the request and give a

response.”

AUSTRALIAN DESTROYERS DELAYED TO SAVE SKILLBASE

The delivery of the first Australian Hobart Class Air Warfare Destroyer (AWD) has been postponed until March 2016. The announcement came when Defence Minister Stephen Smith attended a keel laying ceremony for the future HMAS Hobart, in Adelaide. The decision was made in order to avoid a decline in shipbuilding skills and infrastructure before construction begins on the Collins Class replacement submarines, of which 12 are planned.

The rescheduling of Hobart (from 2014 to 2016) means the second ship, Brisbane, will now be expected in September 2017, and the third, Sydney, in March 2019.

The Aus \$8 billion project is currently the largest such defence programme underway with approximately 2,500 people working directly on it across Australia. Each destroyer is made of 31 blocks mainly constructed in Australia, but with a small number fabricated overseas. All blocks will be combined by the firm ASC at the South Australian government's Common User Facility in Adelaide. The gap in warship construction that occurred after the final Anzac Class frigate, Perth, was finished, and the beginning of the Hobart Class destroyers led to a considerable loss of shipbuilding expertise as skilled personnel found alternative jobs due to the shortfall in work. The revised schedule aims to reduce peak demand on critical resources and facilities, but there will be no cost increases or job losses. Once in service, the Hobart Class destroyers, which are a development of the Spanish F-100 Alvaro de Bazan Class (similarly equipped with the AEGIS combat system), will be among the most powerful warships of their type and far more capable than destroyers in neighbouring navies.

EGYPTIAN SUBMARINE DEAL

Germany has reportedly rejected heavy Israeli pressure not to sell two Type 209 submarines to Egypt. It also plans to go ahead despite continuing instability in the Arab nation. A potential deal for German submarines has been reported for some years now, with formal approval for the sale apparently given in November 2011. Now it has allegedly been finalised. Though the Type 214 attack submarine has generally superseded the Type 209, it remains in widespread use and is still a highly capable submarine. Bangladesh may also seek a variant of the Type 209 to establish its own submarine capability by the end of the decade. The Israeli navy's Dolphin Class submarines are of the HDW Type 800 design, which is a development of the Type 209. The Egyptian Navy currently has four elderly Improved Romeo Class submarines that were obtained from China. They were 'tropicalised' for local service, and have been upgraded with new radar, sonar, and sensors, plus have the ability to fire UGM-84 sub-Harpoon Anti-Ship Missiles. Their operational worth is questionable at best. There are Type 209 submarines surplus to Germany Navy requirements that may be offered to Egypt. Two such boats were recently recommissioned into the Colombian Navy.

UK BUYS PATROL VESSELS

Rather than renew the lease of the three River Class Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) that secure territorial waters around the British Isles, the Ministry of Defence has purchased them outright from BAES for £39m. Under the previous agreement the vessels had been leased by the MoD for £7m per annum for the past nine years. The contract was set for renegotiation in 2013 with the likelihood of an increase in the annual cost. Purchasing the vessels will secure their service in home waters for the next decade. Based at Portsmouth Naval Base, HMS Tyne, HMS Severn and HMS Mersey tackle everything from anti-smuggling, Search and Rescue (SAR) to fisheries protection. They are said to have excelled in their duties, and are a useful proving ground for would be captains of larger ships in the Fleet.

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