**SOME NOTES ON THE VISION ON THE FUTURE OF THE NETHERLANDS SUBMARINE SERVICE[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Siemon Wezeman

Senior Resaercher

Arms and Military Expenditure Programme

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Submarines in the world today**

*Which countries have a submarine service, how is that organized and which countries operate in which parts of the world ? Which threats play a part in this?*

*Which countries are planning to replace or buy submarines?*

Interest in submarines has increased in recent years. New technologies such as air-independent propulsion (AIP), submarine-launched land-attack missiles, long-range guided torpedoes (Germany has tested such to ranges of over 100km) and submarine-launched anti-ship missiles are giving submarines significantly increased capabilities for offensive and defensive operations. Countries that have operated submarines in the past decades generally plan to maintain this capability, if sometimes at a lower numerical level. Only 4 countries have in the last decades deleted their submarine capability: Bulgaria decommissioned the last of four, very out-dated, submarines in 2011. Denmark decommissioned her last submarine in 2004. Romania’s single submarine has been inactive for 20 years. Serbia and Montenegro decommissioned its last submarine in 2002. In all four cases lack of budget and other priorities at a time when the submarines were in need of major modernization or replacement played the main role in the decision to abandon the capability.

Most NATO and other European with existing submarine forces have drastically reduced the number of boats since the end of the Cold War, but on the other hand have generally acquired new boats or modernized the existing ones.

In other regions several countries with existing submarine forces have acquired replacements (Brazil. South Africa, Chile, Pakistan, India) or are planning them. Surprisingly, for several of those countries no obvious military threat existed or exists, that could explain the acquisitions or plans. In Asia and Oceania the interest in submarines increased. Existing submarine forces have generally been maintained or increased in numbers and improved in capabilities and/or are planned to follow that pattern (e.g. Australia plans top double its force to 12; South Korea plans more and larger boats; Japan has decided to increase its force). In addition, several states in the region have acquired their first submarines in recent years: Singapore in 1995, Malaysia in 2002, Viet Nam in 2009 and Bangladesh in 2013. Myanmar, Thailand and the Philippines have announced or indicated plans to acquire submarines in the near future. Submarine interest in this region is largely driven by serious and increasing tensions between different states in the region, especially over maritime claims and with potential confrontation in a maritime domain. Submarines are here often seen an excellent anti access/area denial weapons for ‘underdog’ states, particularly those facing China.

International cooperation in submarine development and construction brings with it the issue of export control and arms control. The Vision acknowledges that the proliferation of submarines, frigates and missile systems is increasing concerns about security, also of the Netherlands.

**Some notes on *The Vision on the future of the Netherlands Submarine Service***

In its letter to Parliament, *The Vision on the future of the Netherlands Submarine Service*, the Dutch Ministry of Defence makes clear cases for a Dutch maritime capability and for cooperation as part of the planned replacement of the current 4 Walrus Class submarines. On the other hand, it makes a rather weak case for a maintained ‘underwater capability’. Missing from the document are alternative solutions for those roles listed as reasons for new submarines, alternatives that could and would be need less funding than the considerable costs of acquiring and operating 4 new submarines. Several of the threats and operations mentioned for which ‘the submarine in superbly suited’ seem to actually been more suited for surface vessels or other military means:

* enforcement of a weapons embargo by means of a maritime blockade. The specific example of the sanctions against Yugoslavia and its successor states in the 1990s is given, but most arms embargoes (and other sanctions) are not enforced by a maritime blockade, but rather by law enforcement and customs agencies (including their intelligence units), and by political pressure. Military forces are only of secondary importance and then mainly with surface ships and patrol aircraft – not with submarines.
* supporting military interventions.

It is difficult to see a) how submarines do these things better than other cheaper and more multifunction systems, and b) if the Netherlands is willing to participate in any of these activities with heavy military means.

The *Vision* also mentions intelligence gathering as a major role, but fails to explain how submarines are better for this role than other means – logic seems to point much more towards using cheaper, more capable and much more flexible means of intelligence gathering such as aircraft (including long-endurance UAVs), surface ships or land-based equipment.

The point on protection of the Dutch interests in the Caribbean really begs an explanation of the threats (probably only Venezuela, partly equipped with Dutch naval equipment in recent years) that face the Netherlands in that region and how submarines are a better answer to these than other, again cheaper and more flexible/multi-function, solutions.

While agreeing to some extent that the security picture globally is one of growing uncertainty and threats, again the *Vision* seems to take a very dim view of the threats posed by various countries and a rather (non-traditional) active role for Dutch forces to counter far-away threats. When *Vision* points out that disruption of international shipping, even at a great distance from the Netherlands, is a threat, one can only agree. But again *Vision* needs to explain a) what the Netherlands is willing to do about such threats, alone, with NATO or in any other alliance or group, and b) how submarines do these things better than other cheaper and more multi-function systems – systems that likely also would be less escalatory because they give more options in the violence spectrum than submarines.

The *Vision* specifically mentions counter-piracy and counter narco-trafficking as roles which Dutch submarines have fulfilled, but again is fails to compare the effectiveness versus costs of submarines in this role with much simpler and flexible systems (e.g. basic maritime patrol aircraft such as the DASH-8 use by the Coast Guard, patrol vessels like the Holland Class, or an increase in the analysing capabilities of military and other intelligence services).

*Vision* claims that the current Walrus Class, because of its size, is better suited to shallow water operations than nuclear submarines (even if the Walrus at 2800 tonnes is already big for conventional submarines and thus less suited to shallow waters than for example the new German boats), but at the same time suggest that the replacement boats would be bigger for an ‘expeditionary role’ and thus less fitted to the shallow water operations that seem to be one of the main reasons to have Dutch submarine force. As note above, *Vision*, also does not clearly explain in which ‘expeditionary’ operations the Netherlands would be willing to use submarines.

Lastly, and on a different field, *Vision* acknowledges that the proliferation of submarines, frigates and missile systems is increasing concerns about security, also of the Netherlands but a) ignores how some of those weapons proliferate from the Netherlands (e.g. frigates form Viet Nam, Morocco and Indonesia) and b) does not bring up that international cooperation in submarine development and construction brings with it export control and arms control issues. Potentially the last issue could be less an issue if cooperating with countries that themselves have very strong principles on where to export to – interestingly, the country with still the strictest export rules AND with advanced submarine technology (specifically in the size suggested for the Dutch programme) is Japan, which is not mentioned as a potential partner.

1. The author was specifically asked to comment on the strategic environment and to comment on *The Vision on the future of the Netherlands Submarine* – the Dutch Ministry of Defence’s presentation of the planned acquisition of new submarines to replace the Walrus Class*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. SIPRI is an independent international institute dedicated to research into conflict, armaments, arms control and disarmament. Established in 1966, SIPRI provides data, analysis and recommendations, based on open sources, to policymakers, researchers, media and the interested public. SIPRI as such expresses no views and those expressed in this document are those of the author only. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)