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Don't just dither, do it

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It is the hope of industry that the Federal Government's newly released surface fleet strategy will provide much greater certainty and consistency for big parts of Australian defence industry, but successful implementation is critical.

Past struggles in managing shipbuilding projects underline the urgency for effective project delivery. In increasingly challenging times, our national security depends on it.

Enough of the reviews. Enough of the delays. Enough of the dithering.

Decisions have been made and the time for action is now. We cannot afford to look back in a decade from now and see that our shipbuilding industry has gone through another valley of death, that we haven't developed the skills we need to deliver and that we don't actually have functioning ships on the water.

The starting point of this national endeavour should be a shared understanding that we cannot have the genuine national security we crave without the industrial security of a sovereign defence industry that both builds and sustains our defence assets.

As we navigate the complexities of the Australian defence landscape and the evolving Indo-Pacific strategic challenges, it is imperative that defence industry is provided with clear capability forecasts, a funding pipeline and the appropriate resources to implement this major restructure of our surface fleet.

The real work begins now. The reimagining of our naval capabilities comes amid criticism that Canberra was too slow to react to the dire warnings of the Defence Strategic Review.

The Federal Government needs to use its own firepower to put the proverbial rocket up Defence, which has taken too long to get to this point. At the same time it needs to match its words with appropriate funding.

It needs to be prepared to allocate more funding to build more capability if that is required as our security and geopolitical circumstances change. If the worst comes to pass, we need our war fighters to be given every opportunity to win.

An important aspect of this new plan is the estimated 3700 direct jobs that will be supported in South Australia and Western Australia into the 2040s.

The decision to scale back the Hunter Class program will be challenging for some. The reduction in the number of Hunter frigates raises concerns, particularly on the need for consistency in South Australia to deliver the work.

A further challenge will be that the initial purchase of "tier 2" ships will be built overseas and will require transition to an Australian build. This will need to be carefully managed to ensure the engagement of Australian supply chains.

The announcement that a shipbuilding forecast will be issued biennially with the National Defence Strategy is welcome. The first of these will be released with the Naval Shipbuilding and Sustainment Plan, and Ai Group and our members up and down the supply chain look forward to working with the Government on this.

Defence industry needs to be embedded in our national industrial framework. We've seen how other nations like Germany, Sweden, Israel, France and Canada do it successfully.

Our national success depends on us getting this right.

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