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Saronic Submission to the Inquiry into the Department of Defence Annual Report 2023-24

Executive Summary

Saronic welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade, to inform its inquiry into the Department of Defence Annual Report 2023-24.

Our submission focuses on the integration of **Uncrewed/Autonomous Systems and AI to the Joint Force** and makes recommendations of how to leverage the opportunities and lessons learnt by our closest security partner, the United States. This submission highlights the importance of Defence engaging with industry partners who are at the forefront of technological advancements and that have proven capabilities with allied nations to enable agile and rapid acquisition processes.

In today's rapidly evolving threat landscape, it is critically important that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) can acquire the best in class and leading-edge capability whilst considering the workforce implications in an environment where access to talent is highly competitive.

Recommendations

Saronic offers the following recommendations about the ADF's future investment in autonomous systems:

1. Increased focus and pressure on development of **agile acquisition processes** to better support speed to capability. Rapid design cycles mean that the pace of development is as critical as the improvement itself and having an acquisition process that can cope with fast change is essential especially in the autonomous systems space.
2. **Leveraging the AUKUS agreement** to strengthen Australia's ability to integrate state-of-the-art capabilities into its military, enhancing interoperability with US and UK military assets and ensuring that both nations are better prepared to respond to evolving security challenges anywhere in the world. This deeper engagement not only boosts Australia's defence posture but also solidifies its position as a key partner in regional security and global defence initiatives.

Agile Acquisition Processes

Australia's complex and dynamic strategic maritime environment and strategic outlook emphasise the need for rapid deployment of advanced maritime capabilities. The Ukrainian campaign against the Russian Black Sea Fleet, for example, has demonstrated the effectiveness of uncrewed surface vessels in modern naval warfare. The National Defence Strategy's strategy of denial underpins Defence planning; however, the 2024 Integrated Investment Program highlights a severe lack of programs dedicated to developing these crucial capabilities.

Speed of capability acquisition is an acknowledged critical challenge[1] in the 2023 Defence Strategic Review, which is of particular relevance to autonomy, as technology must keep pace with the contemporary battlefield. Autonomous systems on the Ukrainian battlefield and the responses to new technology by both sides in that conflict, highlight the need for rapid response. For Australia the challenge is twofold: to rapidly grow Australia's military maritime capabilities to address its current inadequate mass; and to be responsive to future emerging threats. Enhancing agility to Defence's acquisition processes is pivotal to addressing both challenges, as emerging threats - and opportunities - develop at a pace that Defence's traditional procurement processes are unable to respond to. Inherent within achieving enhanced acquisition agility will be for Defence to be prepared to accept higher risk within rapid acquisition cycles, another lesson from Ukraine as well as the US.

Importantly, Defence should emphasise competitive demonstrations or 'bake offs' so that performance and suitability can be compared in an operational environment. An over-emphasis on requirements can stifle innovative agility by allowing industry too much time to demonstrate that their technology works, if at all. On-water opportunities to compete will demonstrate what works and what doesn't, leading to better capability reaching the ADF, faster.

AUKUS

The AUKUS agreement enables Australia to accelerate the integration of advanced autonomous systems, including Autonomous Surface Vessels (ASV), into the ADF. By leveraging AUKUS, Australia gains access to cutting-edge technologies from the US and UK, ensuring its autonomous capabilities align with advancements in AI, sensor fusion, and uncrewed systems. At a finer level, harmonising supply chains allows US vessels to be equipped with Australian components, such as advanced radar, sensors and communications payloads. The industrial collaboration alone is a valuable means of force projection.

This will enhance the ADF's interoperability with allied forces while strengthening maritime surveillance, force protection, and anti-submarine warfare capabilities. The integration of

[1] 2023 Defence Strategic Review - Turning expectations into reality more quickly | Defence

ASVs through AUKUS also improves joint and combined operations by enabling efficient data sharing, coordinated mission planning, and enhanced situational awareness.

Beyond technology, AUKUS deepens collaboration in doctrine, training, and sustainment, ensuring Australian forces are proficient in operating advanced systems. As Indo-Pacific security challenges evolve, Australia's ability to deploy ASVs alongside its own larger assets, and those of its allies will be crucial. By embracing AUKUS-driven maritime autonomous systems, the ADF can strengthen its force posture and contribute to collective security in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

Australia's ability to field ASVs at scale will depend on its capacity to adopt agile acquisition processes and leverage strategic partnerships like AUKUS. The urgency of this challenge is underscored by the rapid evolution of autonomous warfare, as seen in Ukraine, and the significant investments made by AUKUS partners in autonomous maritime capabilities. Ukraine proves that operationally proven technology must be chosen over mere promises to innovate; with capability 'bake offs' the only way to determine what works and what doesn't.

While initiatives like *Autonomous Warrior* provide a valuable testbed, meaningful progress requires a shift toward agile procurement, shorter innovation cycles, higher acceptance of risk shared between Defence and industry, and accelerated adoption of battle-proven technologies.

Companies like Saronic offer a critical advantage by rapidly delivering capabilities within months, helping to bridge the growing gap between Australia, its allies, and potential adversaries.

About Saronic

Saronic is a US-based defence technology company specialising in the design and production of ASVs that enhance maritime operations and force projection. Saronic opened an Australian office in 2024 and has more recently opened a UK office. Capable of executing missions independently or within a swarm, these ASVs provide scalable, adaptable, and proven solutions that extend situational awareness, increase operational reach, and enhance survivability in contested environments.

By integrating vessel design with advanced AI-driven autonomy, Saronic ensures interoperability with existing defence systems while maintaining software flexibility to support multi-domain operations. Its ASVs are engineered for rapid upgrades, optimising manned-unmanned teaming and resource allocation. The company's demonstration at the US Navy's Integrated Battle Problem 24.1 exercise reinforced its operational credibility, showcasing its ability to deliver mission-ready autonomy at scale.

As Australia accelerates the integration of uncrewed and autonomous systems into the Joint Force, engaging with industry leaders like Saronic will be critical. The company's track record highlights its capacity to deliver at speed and scale, offering valuable insights into agile acquisition processes and mass-deployable maritime autonomy for Australia's future defence readiness. Furthermore, Saronic's cutting-edge autonomous capabilities align with AUKUS Pillar 2 objectives, which focus on advancing collaboration in emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence and autonomous systems, to enhance interoperability and defence resilience across allied forces.

Saronic contact details

For further information on this submission and additional information relating to Saronic's capabilities and experience, please see below:

Mr Matthew Tracey, Director of International, Saronic Technologies

Mr Matthew Tracey has a deep expertise in global defence and a background in technology and law. Formerly, Mr Tracey worked at Palantir Technologies, where he was Head of Global Partnerships and Head of International Government. He has worked in Canberra, Sydney, Silicon Valley, New York and London. An Australian citizen, he resides in Sydney.

As the Director of International at Saronic Technologies, Mr Tracey is responsible for bringing Saronic's autonomous technologies to allied defence forces, maritime agencies and the commercial sector. He actively engages in Australian industry and seeks opportunities to partner and integrate with the best technologies and shipbuilding Australia has to offer.