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Accountability Needed as Australia's Defense Spending Comes Under Security

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Australia's top military official has admitted the Australian Defence Force (ADF) must improve how it manages massive taxpayer-funded projects. As the nation commits to unprecedented defense spending, the call for more accountability and better results is growing louder, both at home and from international allies.

Chief of the Defence Force Admiral David Johnston recently acknowledged ongoing failures within Australia's defense procurement system. With the multi-nation *AUKUS* (Australia-United Kingdom-United States) security pact facing renewed scrutiny from the Trump

administration, the spotlight is on whether Australia can deliver on its commitments, financially and operationally. Notably, *AUKUS* aims to enhance military capabilities across the three nations, including through nuclear-powered submarines and advanced technologies.

“We aim to do better,” Admiral Johnston told ABC News, in a rare admission from the military’s highest ranks. “We want to see every acquisition project that we are on, deliver on time and capability.” He maintained that while the ADF is acquiring some of the most advanced systems in the world, which inherently come with risk, that does not excuse the waste or delays that have plagued defense spending.

That waste is now being tallied. According to internal reviews and independent measures, some defense projects have accumulated nearly a century’s worth of combined delays. A standout example is the \$45 billion *Hunter-class Frigates* program, which is not expected to deliver its first ship until 2032. Johnston, however, remains confident in the program, stating he is “utterly convinced” the ships will be “magnificent” upon completion.

The acting Defence Minister, Pat Conroy, confirmed this week that the Trump administration’s review of the *AUKUS* agreement remains incomplete. Conroy defended the government’s pace on defense investments but noted growing U.S. concern. Washington has reportedly urged Australia to lift its defense spending to 3.5% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which would amount to an eye-watering \$287 billion over the next decade. For context, Australia currently spends around 2% of its GDP on defense.

Defence Minister Richard Marles echoed the need for sharper fiscal oversight, acknowledging that “there is clear pressure on the Department of Defence to improve its management of public funds.” That pressure, however, is not just financial – it’s strategic. With tensions rising in the Indo-Pacific and alliances like *AUKUS* at stake, Australia is under the gun to prove it can deliver more than lofty promises.

While the rhetoric from military leadership suggests an awareness of the problem, the real test will come in execution. With billions at stake and international credibility on the line, vague reassurances are no longer enough. Australia’s defense establishment must shift from intent to impact, not only to strengthen national security, but also to uphold the trust of the taxpayers footing the bill.