Taiwan could have the first of a new fleet of diesel-electric submarines operating in its waters in seven years, a US military expert predicted on Tuesday.

Speaking at the close of the 13th annual US-Taiwan Defense Industry Conference, 2049 Institute executive director Mark Stokes said that if Taipei remains committed to the submarine program, “I don’t have any doubt they will succeed.”

US-Taiwan Business Council president Rupert Hammond-Chambers agreed, saying: “This is happening. It’s just a matter of working out which path is taken.”

The pair’s comments are one of the most positive signals to date about the future of Taiwan’s proposed submarine program.

Participants in the two-day conference in Williamsburg, Virginia, focused on Taiwan’s desire and need for submarines, other arms sales and Taipei’s defense budget.

Hammond-Chambers said the conference — which many attendees judged to be “an extremely positive success” — addressed a series of difficult questions.

“We talked a good deal about submarines. About the process or lack thereof of Taiwan arms sales. Is the Taiwan arms sales process broken? Will it take a change in the US government — Republican or Democrat — in 2017 for some significant adjustments to be made? Is Taiwan spending enough on defense? These were the issues swirling around the conference,” he said.

Stokes said there is “significant hope” that US President Barack Obama’s administration will move forward with US Congressional notification for phase one of a two-phase submarine program.

This first phase — costing US$360 million — could be approved next year and would be to design a diesel-electric submarine exclusively for Taiwan. The second phase would be producing the submarines.

The alternative would be for Taiwan to design and develop a submarine itself with technical assistance and the provision of certain types of components by US industry and engineering consultants, Stokes said.

Hammond-Chambers said a Congressional notification was ready to be sent to Capitol Hill by the US Department of State, adding that significant work had been completed on the notification and that it represented a comprehensive first step toward providing Taiwan with new submarines.

Stokes said the White House had committed to assist Taiwan in the acquisition of diesel-electric submarines as far back as 2001.

“As long as the current administration maintains that policy, then I believe Taiwan will have a submarine in operation by 2021,” he said.

Stokes said that 2021 would be the 50th anniversary of Taiwan losing its seat at the UN.

“Regardless of which way it goes, whether it’s foreign military sales or an indigenous program, as long as the commitment is there in Taiwan — the leadership commitment — I don’t have any doubt that the Republic of China [ROC] leadership will succeed in having a submarine in the water,” he said.

Stokes said that the key factor was Taiwan having the resolution to move forward.

He said the program would have an immediate effect on cross-strait negotiations.

“Having a diesel-electric submarine program in play sends a clear signal of Taiwan’s resolve and it would increase Taiwan’s confidence in being able to negotiate with the other side of the Taiwan Strait from a position of strength,” Stokes said.

In 1969, Taiwan made its first request to the US for help to acquire a fleet of at least eight diesel-electric submarines.

Asked if Chinese objections might sink the submarine program, Hammond-Chambers said that a study showed that China-Taiwan relations invariably improved after a major arms sale and that China’s bark “is always worse than its bite.”

Stokes said that US government involvement in arms sales to Taiwan was “most difficult” for Beijing to accept because “arms sales are the most visible manifestation of Taiwan’s sovereign status.”

He said that if Taiwan was really just a province of China, the US would not be selling it arms.

“As long as the US maintains a definite commitment ... we should see an operational sub in the water by 2021,” he said.

He said that if it becomes necessary, Taiwan is “fully capable” of going the indigenous route.

“It is not a question of can Taiwan make submarines, it is only a question of how sophisticated a submarine Taiwan’s industry can develop,” Stokes said. “Colombian drug runners make submarines. The innovative capacity of Taiwan society is grossly underestimated. It’s one of the best in the world. The Republic of China Navy has been able to maintain a submarine that was manufactured in 1943. That is not easy. It is an amazing feat.”

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