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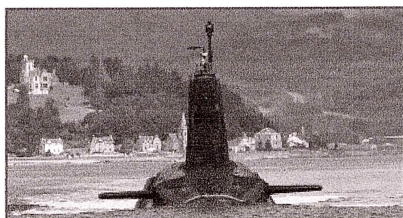
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Trident replacement threatened by doubts over US submarines

May 3, 2010 by [Guest Writer](#) · [1 Comment](#)

Rob Edwards



A Trident submarine on the Clyde. *Picture: JohnED76*

The UK government's plans to replace Trident submarines could be thrown into disarray by growing doubts over their future in the US.

The US Defence Secretary, Robert Gates, is today expected to challenge the American Navy's plans to spend up to \$80 billion (£52 bn) on 12 new submarines to replace the existing Ohio-class boats which carry Trident nuclear missiles.

Because the UK programme is so dependent on the US, this could hugely increase costs and jeopardise Labour and Conservative promises to replace the Trident nuclear weapons system.

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Gates is due to give a speech to a major US naval conference in Maryland. According to his aides, he will raise a series of questions about the Ohio replacement programme, due to commence in 2027.

Moves by President Obama to cut nuclear weapons globally, the economic crisis and competing naval programmes will all be cited, they say, as reasons for rethinking plans for future submarines.

The speech will be interpreted by observers as a direct challenge to navy chiefs. The message will be that, if they don't cut back their submarine programme themselves, cuts may be imposed upon them.

Gates has been blunt about the implications of the high cost submarine replacement programme in the past. "In the latter part of this decade, it will suck all the air out of the navy's shipbuilding program," he told a House of Representatives subcommittee in March. "Some tough choices are going to have to be made, either in terms of more investment, or choices between the size of surface fleets you want and the submarine fleets."

The submarine programme has also come under pressure in Congress. Gene Taylor, the democrat who chairs the influential seapower committee, last week threatened to recommend against funding it.

One big problem is that the estimated cost of the new US submarines has doubled. Three experts told a subcommittee of the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee on 20 January that the average cost of each submarine had risen from \$3.4 billion (£2.2 bn) to between \$6 and \$7 billion (£3.9-£4.6 bn).

According to congressional sources, this was very likely to put up the price tag for replacing Trident submarines in the UK, estimated by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) as £11-14 billion in 2006. It was "highly improbably" that UK costs could now be kept that low, one expert said.

"Robert Gates is planning to cut the number of new US submarines," said John Ainslie, the co-ordinator of the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. "This will increase even further the amount the British taxpayer will have to contribute, because this is a joint Anglo-American project."

The cost of replacing Trident submarines would be "far higher" than the British government has admitted, he argued.

The new US and UK submarines are meant to share much of the same technology, including their Trident missile compartments, navigation systems and fire controls. The countries have also been working closely together to develop the kind of nuclear reactors that will power the submarines.

The revelation about Trident's escalating costs in the US was described as "devastating", by Angus Robertson, the Scottish National Party's defence spokesman and Westminster leader.

"The UK has never had a truly independent nuclear weapons system and any decision to scrap or even modify the US programme has massive cost consequences for the Ministry of Defence," he said.

"It is no surprise, given the squeeze on their defence budget and President Obama's desire for disarmament that the US Defence Secretary is considering scrapping the fleet. The London parties should wake up and realise the true costs of what they are proposing and scrap it all together."

The MoD has argued in the past that it would be able to build submarines cheaper than the US. Last week, it declined to comment.

- Rob Edwards on Twitter

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One Response to "Trident replacement threatened by doubts over US submarines"

1.  [baglady](#) says:
[May 3, 2010 at 7:37 am](#)

good on you Rob,for telling it like it is,the very idea of spending
that amount of scarce money on the vanity project that is nuclear