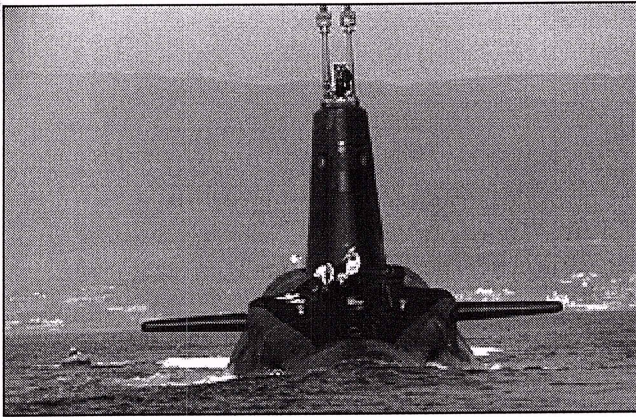


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Wed 9 Jun 2004

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HMS Victorious, a Trident ballistic missile submarine, sails up Gare Loch on the west coast of Scotland.
 Picture: PA

Secret plans for Trident replacement

TIM RIPLEY

Key points

- Royal Navy prepares multi-purpose nuclear submarine to replace Trident
- Claims announcement delayed to avoid upsetting Labour voters
- Reports UK preparing to design new atomic warhead at Aldermaston

Key quote

"By making the submarine more versatile, we get more value for our money and don't have billions of pounds of capital investment tied up in a submarines that can never be used for anything except blowing up the world" - MoD source

Story in full ROYAL Navy experts are preparing secret designs for a new generation of multi-purpose nuclear submarines to replace Britain's Trident fleet at the end of the next decade.

The Scotsman has learned that work on a replacement for the Royal Navy's nuclear deterrent is further advanced than had previously been known - despite claims by the government that no decision has been made on a successor for the four Faslane-based Trident submarines.

The aim of the plan is to give ministers the chance to accelerate work on the Trident's successor immediately after the next election, to allow a replacement for the existing fleet of ballistic-missile-firing submarines to be entered into service around 2020.

About 3,000 sailors and 4,000 civilian workers employed at the Trident's bases - Faslane and Coulport, on the Clyde - are anxiously awaiting developments.

Naval sources suggest Tony Blair has all but made up his mind to replace the £9billion Trident system to ensure Britain retains its "seat at the top table of nuclear powers".

The government commissioned an opinion poll on a replacement for Trident last year, and just over half the respondents gave it their support, reinforcing views in Downing Street that it should move ahead on the project once the next election is out of the way.

Even if it is popular with the wider public, Mr Blair appears not to want to antagonise Labour activists by raising the Trident replacement issue ahead of the next general election.

In last year's white paper, the Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, said: "Decisions on whether to replace Trident are not needed in this parliament but are likely in the next one," implying that a decision could be put off until the end of the decade.

The head of the Royal Navy, however, has said any decision would be expected in the "next two or three years", because of the need to begin work to have a replacement for Trident ready for when the first of the Vanguard class submarines is due to start retiring in 2020.

The First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Alan West, made the comments at a conference on naval warfare held at the Royal United Services last month.

The United States-based publication Defense News has since revealed that the Royal Navy has launched design studies to examine replacing both the service's existing Trident missile-firing submarines and hunter-killer submarines with a single class of multi-role, nuclear-powered submarine.

The costs of designing a new submarine and then keeping two types in service are described as "astronomical" by Royal Navy officers.

The futuristic submarines, dubbed the "maritime underwater future capability", would be fitted with vertical-launch missile tubes to allow them to fire both nuclear-tipped long-range missiles or conventionally-armed Tomahawk cruise missiles.

This new vessel was originally envisaged as only replacing the Royal Navy's hunter-killer submarines, but The Scotsman now understands it is becoming multi-role in nature.

Britain recently bought 64 new "smart" versions of the Tomahawk from the US for £70 million, to replenish stocks fired during last year's Iraq war.

"By making the submarine more versatile, we get more value for our money and don't have billions of pounds of capital investment tied up in a submarines that can never be used for anything except blowing up the world," an MoD source said.

"It cost more than £9 billion to buy Trident, and there is just no way we can justify that kind of money any more."

Futuristic designs of the new submarine include undersea remotely piloted vehicles to penetrate enemy coastal defences. The key to making the new multi-role - but smaller - submarine work is a new family of miniaturised nuclear warheads. There have been persistent reports that Britain is preparing to design a new warhead at the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston, in Berkshire, and is already co-operating with the US on a new family of mini-nuclear warheads, but the MoD has denied any such work is under way.

The huge costs of designing and operating nuclear submarines, however, might derail the plans for a new class. The new Astute class nuclear-attack submarines, currently being built by BAE Systems, are already £800 million over budget and several years late.

The Royal Navy's shipbuilding programme is under intense pressure from the Treasury, which is balking at the cost of the future aircraft carrier and Type 45 destroyers being built by BAE Systems on the Clyde.

The ministry's cash shortages have led some to suggest it might be forced to undertake a "life extensive" programme for the four Trident submarines. This would involve replacing key components and modifying the submarines.

Even this might be no longer affordable and the RAF is reported to be pushing to take over responsibility for nuclear deterrence.

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British armed forces:

<http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=1034>

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