

R&D Funds Needed For New Nuclear Weapons Submarine, US Panel Advises

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WASHINGTON Advisers to US Strategic Command this month urged the Defense Department to begin research and development soon for a new nuclear-weapons submarine, according to the Navy.

If a future craft is developed, it might replace today's fleet of 14 Ohio-class submarines — dubbed SSBNs — and possibly the Trident D-5 nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles they carry.

At the Navy's request, the command asked its Strategic Advisory Group to compile a list of desired capabilities for the new submarine. The advisory group's "Next SSBN Task Force" reported its findings during a two-day session in Omaha, Neb., that concluded Nov. 15.

The task force "drawn from a nearly 30-year-old organization of more than 45 experts from the government, private sector and academia" stopped short of offering specific recommendations for follow-on submarine or missile capabilities, according to the service. But it did counsel that the Navy begin investing research and development dollars to explore the prospects.

"Although it is far too early to make decisions regarding capabilities which might be needed in the future, it is prudent now to initiate thoughtful research and development efforts to review a range of capabilities which should be incorporated in a follow-on deterrent platform," Lt. Karen Eifert, a Navy spokeswoman, told Global Security Newswire this week.

She added that the task force found it "justifiable to provide an early investment in research and development studies so that any dividends could be incorporated into a future design."

The panel had been expected to draft initial recommendations for technology development and prototyping that might be funded beginning in fiscal 2009 or 2010, according to advisory group sources.

However, it remained unclear this week how soon the Pentagon might request funds to explore a new nuclear-weapons submarine. Eifert said she could provide no further information.

The Pentagon carried out a Nuclear Posture Review in 2002 stating that a Trident submarine replacement would likely be needed around 2029, assuming the nation still requires a sea-based strategic nuclear force (see GSN, Jan. 7, 2002).

The posture review laid out two potential options: a dedicated nuclear weapons-bearing submarine, like today's Ohio-class boats; or a variant of the Virginia-class attack submarine, which might be modified to take on the SSBN mission. A replacement for the Ohio-class submarine could be an all-new design or derived from current Trident specifications, according to the posture review.

The review anticipated that a new program would have to begin around 2016 for the first submarine to be fielded in 2029. However, defense sources have told GSN that it now appears initial funding would be sought by 2010.

Further details of the Strategic Advisory Group meeting are being closely held. The sessions are closed to the public for security reasons, according to disclosure information the panel has posted to the Web as an official federal advisory committee.

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Comment

One of the most important things to note here is the long planning horizon. This is relevant to expectations for the next administration. Also, it's worth remembering that when the Nuclear Posture Review was leaked in 2002, it was largely characterized as a "wish list." It looks like they're getting their wishes.

— Jackie Cabasso, Western States Legal Foundation