

UK nuclear defence up in the air

JAMES KIRKUP

WESTMINSTER EDITOR

BRITAIN's next generation of nuclear weapons could be based on aircraft, not submarines, defence insiders have admitted.

Ministers are due to decide later in this parliament whether to replace the ageing Trident missile system.

Despite government insistence that the decision remains open, most military insiders believe a new generation of nuclear weapons will be ordered.

One option being widely discussed in the Ministry of Defence is for the next nuclear deterrent to be smaller warheads that could be carried by long-range bombers, replacing the Faslane-based atomic-powered submarines that currently carry the weapons.

Rear-Admiral Alan Massey, the Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff, yesterday confirmed that military planners are preparing for an order to put nuclear arms on aircraft.

"If a decision were taken that a replacement deterrent would be needed, then one assumes that the government would take a broad look at whatever capabilities might be able to deliver that deterrence," he said.

"Ballistic missile submarines are an established way of doing it but that by no means rules out other options, so we are mentally preparing to be asked to investigate a range of options."

Government spending at Aldermarston, the government's atomic research centre, is being substantially increased for the coming years.

While the government says the money is to manage Trident decommissioning, MPs suspect the decision to build new weapons has already been taken.

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