

Current and Projected status of ballistic missile submarines of the Russian Northern Fleet

According to the Norwegian based group Bellona over the last year the Northern Fleet has only been able to keep at most two or three strategic ballistic missile submarines on patrol at any one time. The mainstay of this force is the Delta IV class submarines, although there are 7 in service, all with the Northern Fleet, one is currently undergoing repair.

The Typhoon class which were built in response to Trident do not appear to currently be used for patrols. In February this year it was reported that two of the huge submarines have been withdrawn from service for a combination of technical and financial reasons. A third is currently undergoing repairs. The assessment is that the remaining three are armed and are at notice to go to sea, but not used on patrols. There is a planned modernisation program for the Typhoon class but this has not yet been carried out because of lack of money.

The Northern Fleet has is effectively paralysed by a lack of funds. They have been looking at a variety of ways to raise money in order to fund repairs. One submarine was used to launch a rocket with a commercial payload. There have been studies on how to convert the Typhoon class so they could be used as oil tankers. In August 1995 one Victor III class nuclear powered submarine was used to transport goods, including potatoes, from the Kola peninsula to Eastern Siberia.

There are major problems with a huge backlog of decommissioning work on nuclear powered vessels many of which have had reactor problems in the past. The lack of money is a major constraint on running repairs, refits and new built work.

It is unlikely that this situation will improve, indeed it is likely to get worse. As time passes the number of vessels which are fit to go to sea will probably decline. Bellona estimate that by the year 2003 the Northern Fleet may be reduced by natural wastage to 5 - 7 ballistic missile submarines. If this is correct Russia will not have the operational submarines on which to deploy the number of submarine launched warheads permitted by START II.

This analysis depends in part on the general predictions for the political, social and primarily economic climate in Russia. But it is not likely that there would be both an economic recovery and a real political will to invest very heavily in defence in the foreseeable future.

An assessment by Alexi Arbatov concludes that the Russian military may end up like the Chinese PLA - old, large and technologically backward.