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Trident - revisiting the UK deterrent debate

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By Denise Hammick and Richard Scott

In an office suite at BAE Systems' Barrow-in-Furness shipyard in northwest England, the first steps are being taken towards the design and build of a new generation of ballistic missile submarines. The aim of the concept is to ensure that the UK can continue to deploy a submerged strategic nuclear deterrent capability for at least another 50 years.



Within this satellite of the Future Submarines Integrated Project Team - the executive charged with delivering the Successor programme - representatives from the Ministry of Defence (MoD), BAE Systems, Babcock Marine and Rolls-Royce are engaged in a two-year programme of concept work intended to prepare the ground for a new class of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) to replace the four current Vanguard-class boats in Royal Navy (RN) service.

The Successor submarine programme will be a massively complex engineering and project-management endeavour and, while still in its embryonic stages, is already recognised as a defence acquisition programme of unique and unrivalled significance.

Concept phase activities have themselves been split into two parts. The first has concentrated on what form the major system functions will take, including propulsion, combat systems, and strategic weapon systems.

Informed by these outputs and their attendant option sets, a second phase of concept work will develop a coherent and costed submarine design that will meet the overall requirement as well as meet affordability criteria (both in terms of unit production cost and whole-life cost). The programme is expected to reach Initial Gate in the second half of 2009.

Other major systems decisions and Main Gate approval should follow on. Current plans are for a seven-year design phase, a seven-year build phase and a period of sea trials before the first boat enters service.

Yet while a parliamentary vote in March 2007 endorsed government plans to renew the Trident deterrent, it is not yet certain that this new generation of SSBN will ever actually put to sea.

A recent report, 'Trident: the deal isn't done', published by the University of Bradford's Disarmament Research Centre, argues that the real decision is still between four and six years away - the timeframe within which approval will be required to commit to manufacture of the new submarines. It also contends that the arguments deployed by the government to justify the investment in a modernised deterrent force must be re-examined, claiming that it "has presented a number of assertions as facts".

In a statement to parliament on 4 December 2006, timed to coincide with the publication of a White Paper on the

future of the UK's strategic deterrent, then prime minister Tony Blair asserted that it would be imprudent to abandon the deterrent in an era "of unpredictable but rapid change".

Blair argued that "we cannot be certain in the decades ahead that a major nuclear threat to our strategic interests will not emerge", going on to highlight "a new and potentially hazardous threat" from states such as North Korea and Iran. He also drew a "possible connection between some of those states and international terrorism", concluding that it would be "unwise and dangerous for Britain, alone of any of the nuclear powers, to give up its independent nuclear deterrent".

Jointly written by the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the White Paper, 'The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent', articulated the government's justification for retaining an independent strategic deterrent. Although accepting that the strategic threat faced during the Cold War has gone, it argued that the "global context does not justify complete UK nuclear disarmament", asserting: "It is not possible accurately to predict the global security environment over the next 20 to 50 years. On our current analysis we cannot rule out the risk either that a major direct threat to the UK's vital interests will re-emerge or that new states will emerge that possess a more limited nuclear capability, but one that could pose a grave threat to our national interests."

Image: The Royal Navy's four Vanguard-class SSBNs are due to be replaced from 2024 (UK Ministry of Defence)

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