

Trident sub bill rises by £200m

By Trevor Royle Defence Correspondent

BRITAIN will have to spend an extra £200m a year to make the new Trident nuclear submarines a realistic deterrent in the post Cold War world, according to defence economists.

GPALS, the sophisticated nuclear Star Wars shields being planned jointly by the US and Russia, have the potential to cancel out the Trident threat in its present form. Only a doubling up of submarine patrols or a politically-sensitive increase in the number of warheads on each missile can produce the required capability.

The cost of improving the system could add a further £200m a year to the Ministry of Defence's current £10.5bn budget for Trident and will stretch the navy's resources

during the crucial handover period of the ageing and troubled Polaris boats. HMS Vanguard, the first of four Trident submarines, arrives at Faslane this week.

Under the terms of an agreement signed between America and Russia last summer, both countries agreed to develop a space- and land-based anti-ballistic missile shield as the first step towards providing a global system of protection against nuclear attack.

In return for assurances about reducing the former Soviet nuclear arsenal, America will provide Russia with Star Wars technology which

will enable Russian defences to intercept and destroy a saturation attack of 200 warheads.

As each British Trident submarine will only carry up to 128 warheads, the patrols will have to be doubled. "By keeping two submarines on patrol at any one time, the navy's resources will be stretched to the limit," admits a former operations officer with Polaris. "The fact of the matter is that Trident is near the end of the road."

Last night an MoD source denied that the Faslane-based submarine squadron would be unable to meet the challenge of providing a credible deterrent.

However, he also admitted that senior submariners were aware of the neutralising effects of the GPALS shield but believed the Trident's exceptional accuracy — to within a radius of 100 yards — still posed a threat.

The MoD is investigating the possibility of purchasing decoy re-entry vehicles such as the American-built Evader to enhance the Trident system, but senior naval officers fear that this will only keep Britain dependent on American technology.

Another option would be to increase each missile's warhead load from eight to 12, but this is unlikely to be acceptable to the Americans.

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