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## Sub repairs hit Trident security

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The decision to take out of service the entire fleet of nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarines has serious implications for the Royal Navy's operational capability, as well as the security of the Trident missile system, the Ministry of Defence admitted yesterday.

The submarines play a key role in protecting ships as well as those submarines armed with the Trident nuclear deterrent. They are also being armed with the navy's latest long-range weapon, the US Tomahawk cruise missile.

Four of the fleet of 12 hunter-killers, nuclear-powered but conventionally armed, are undergoing separate refitting work. The others will now be laid up for checks that will take many months and tens of millions of pounds to put right.

The decision to withdraw the fleet follows discovery of a fault in the reactor cooling system of HMS Tireless, which has been moored off Gibraltar since May. On opening up the reactor, engineers found a large crack which could have "generic implications", a navy spokesman said yesterday.

In August the navy bowed to Gibraltar public opinion and provided the territory's government with classified information on the submarine's reactor, which was designed in the early 1970s. The navy initially described the fault on Tireless as minimal and suggested it could be repaired within weeks.

John Large, an independent nuclear consultant advising the Gibraltar government, said yesterday the fault raised serious questions about the navy's quality control system. He described the faulty weld in the cooling system as being "very near to the reactor itself".

The loss of the hunter-killer fleet is a huge embarrassment to the MoD, coming after problems with the weapons systems of the navy's Sea Harriers and serious faults in the army's standard rifle, the SA80.

The navy has recently sold off the last of its conventionally powered submarines.

A navy spokesman acknowledged that the decision to withdraw all other submarines except Trident would affect the "security

of Trident".

He declined to say what contingency measures would be taken.

Iain Duncan Smith, shadow defence secretary, said: "Serious questions had to be asked as to why the government has taken so long to make a decision about this when the faults were discovered in May."

Menzies Campbell, the Liberal Democrat defence spokesman, said the decision raised questions of capability and credibility. It would encourage cynics in the US to think Europe got too much of its defence on the cheap.



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