

## Hunter-killer Submarines

3.30 pm

**Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green):** *(by private notice)*: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the Government's decision to withdraw the Royal Navy's nuclear-powered hunter-killer submarines from active service.

**The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar):** First, Mr. Speaker, may I say that it is a real pleasure to address you as such for the first time? I am replying on behalf of the Secretary of State for Defence, who regrets that he is unable to be in the House today.

The Government's decision to withdraw the Royal Navy's nuclear-powered Trafalgar and Swiftsure class hunter-killer submarines from operational service was taken when it became apparent that a flaw in the pipework forming part of the reactor cooling system of HMS Tireless may be generic. As responsible nuclear operators, we decided to carry out a full inspection of all submarines of the strategic submarine nuclear--SSN--flotilla to determine whether this was in fact the case. Some of these submarines were already alongside in refit or undergoing maintenance or repair, and two deployed submarines were recalled.

Initial indications are that the defect may have arisen from the original construction of the submarine and that it is present in other submarines, albeit at an early stage. Let me stress that Vanguard class Trident submarines, which are of a different design, have not been affected.

Until the inspection programme is completed, it is not possible to finalise the repair programme or to quantify the operational implications. The repair is not complex in engineering terms, but, because of the exacting tolerances required for nuclear engineering, it may take some months for submarines to be repaired where this is necessary. The inspection regime and subsequent repair programme will clearly have an impact on our operational programme, although every effort will be made to mitigate this by using other assets and by building on the already close links that exist between the United Kingdom and United States submarine services. Appropriate measures will be taken to protect the deterrent.

I wish to make it clear that at no time has there been any risk to the crew or general public. Safety must take precedence over operational requirements in peacetime, and no submarine will go to sea unless it is safe to do so. Every effort is being made to bring the submarines back into operational service as soon as possible.

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**Mr. Spellar:** The Speaker may be a good Catholic, but I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman's confession will necessarily redeem him so readily.

On the strategic defence review, the decision was taken to have a balanced fleet, leading to a considerable increase in certain parts of the navy--not least the introduction of much larger carriers and the introduction of the type 45. I do not believe that the faults that we are experiencing with the current hunter-killer submarines invalidate that underlying philosophy of the SDR, which provides some constraints in some areas of our operation because we are expanding in others. It was a case of striking that balance. I do not believe that this issue really addresses that.

**Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West):** Which countries is the deterrent now deterring?

**Mr. Spellar:** I am sure that my hon. Friend will be fully aware from previous answers that we do not comment on the operation of the deterrent.