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DEFENCE & ARMS

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U.S. Study Panel Eyes New Nuclear Weapons Submarine

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By Elaine M. Grossman, Global Security 15/9/07
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The command, which is responsible for the nation's nuclear force operations, has assigned its Strategic Advisory Group to develop a list of capabilities desired for a boat that might ultimately replace the service's Ohio-class submarines and the Trident D-5 nuclear-armed ballistic missiles they carry, according to sources close to the panel.

A number of officials provided information for this article on condition that they not be named, because they were not authorized to address the matter publicly.

The advisory group's Next SSBN Task Force is scheduled to report its findings to the top strategic commander during a two-day session beginning Nov. 13, defense sources said. The session is typically held twice a year in Omaha, Neb. is to include the entire Strategic Advisory Group, a nearly 30-year-old organization that has grown to more than 45 experts from the government, private sector and academia.

With the group's deliberations kept secret, it could not be determined this week exactly what the task force would recommend for the future submarine or the missiles it carries.

However, the assessment could include possible performance characteristics for the new weapons platform, such as how it might achieve the stability required for launching missiles while at sea, according to defense sources. Additional recommendations likely would address how many missiles, and of what size, the submarine should carry.

The task force is also expected to sketch initial suggestions for technology development and prototyping that might be funded beginning in fiscal 2009 or 2010, said advisory group sources.

We're always interested in the future of our mission areas and being able to serve the nation's interests," Bruce Sudduth, executive director of the Strategic Advisory Group at Offutt Air Force Base,

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Neb., said in a Sept. 13 telephone interview. "So the viability of our platforms and capabilities is always something we're looking at."

The Defense Department carried out a Nuclear Posture Review in 2002 projecting that a replacement for the Trident submarine would be needed around 2029, assuming the nation continues to require a sea-based strategic nuclear force.

To fill the need, the Pentagon study laid out two potential options: a dedicated nuclear weapons-bearing submarine, known as an SSBN; or a variant of the Virginia-class attack submarine, which might be modified to take on the SSBN mission. A replacement for the Ohio-class submarine could be an all-new design or derived from the current Trident platform, according to the posture review.

The review projected that a new program would have to begin around 2016 for the first submarine to be fielded in 2029. However, defense sources tell *GSN* that it now appears initial funding would be sought by 2010. 

In 2004, then-commander of the Pacific Fleet's submarine force Rear Adm. Paul Sullivan told independent news weekly *Inside the Navy* that the replacement fleet should have more submarines than the 14 currently fielded, with each vessel carrying fewer missiles. Sullivan is now a three-star flag officer who heads Naval Sea Systems Command.

Since its establishment in 1968, the Strategic Advisory Group has provided recommendations on scientific, technical, intelligence, and policy-related issues to Strategic Command's top officer, according to information the command provided to *GSN*.

Air Force Lt. Gen. Robert Kehler is acting commander of Strategic Command, pending the Senate's confirmation of Air Force Gen. Kevin Chilton, the White House nominee to assume the post. Marine Corps Gen. James Cartwright vacated the command position last month when he became vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Meetings of the Strategic Advisory Group are closed to the public for security reasons, according to disclosure information the panel has posted to the Web as an official federal advisory committee.

Funded at more than \$600,000 a year, the SAG meets to discuss strategic issues which relate to the development of the national nuclear war plan, the group states. "Unauthorized disclosure of the information discussed at SAG meetings could have grave impact upon national security."

Source:Ocnus.net 2007