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## U.S. Talking With British About Submarine Recall

By [Robert A. Hamilton](#) - [More Articles](#)

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The U.S. Navy is reviewing nuclear safety problems that led the British to recall all their attack submarines to port for inspections and repairs, though officials said they do not believe similar problems are present in this country's undersea fleet.

After an accident in May, the British discovered problems with a welded joint on the reactor cooling system that could be generic to the fleet. Nine of its 12 submarines were already in port or in a shipyard undergoing repairs, so the order affected just three boats.

"The U.S. is familiar with the submarine cooling system issue the British are concerned with," according to an official Navy statement issued late Monday. "They are taking a conservative approach to this problem. Based on U.S. designs, procedures, quality assurance methods, operating experience, and analysis and inspections, we are satisfied that this issue does not represent a safety concern on U.S. ships."

"Nevertheless, we will continue to follow this matter closely, including continued consultation with the British," the statement continued.

Pressed whether there were systems on U.S. submarines similar to the flawed British system, the Navy responded, "Both the U.S. and the British use pressurized water reactor designs for submarine propulsion. Our inspections and analysis, however, demonstrate this is not an issue in U.S. submarines."

Retired Navy Capt. John J. Demlein Jr., a former chief of staff at Submarine Group Two at the Naval Submarine Base in Groton, said though the U.S. and Great Britain work closely on defense matters, there are differences in the two nuclear submarine fleets.

"We have shared information on design and construction, but they've done all their own work," Demlein said.

The Royal Navy's Trafalgar class is of newer vintage than the Los Angeles-class that make up the bulk of the U.S. undersea fleet, and is smaller: 5,200 tons and 280 feet long, to the Los Angeles' 6,900 tons and 360 feet. The Royal Navy operates seven Trafalgars and five older Swiftsure-class submarines, which are also affected by the recalls.

Though both submarines are powered by the same type of nuclear reactor, the Trafalgars' version was built by Rolls Royce, while General Electric built the S6G reactor in use on Los Angeles-class submarines.

Demlein said he is confident that if the Navy Nuclear Reactors organization had any concerns that the problem plaguing the British boats had implications for the U.S. Navy fleet, "We would inspect and repair our boats as needed."

"The British have had propulsion plan problems in the past that have resulted in submarines

being recalled to port, which didn't affect our systems," Demlein said. "Whether that's the result of differences in the design, or construction, or operation, I'm not sure."

Other submariners said even though the reactor problems might not affect the U.S. fleet, it could still cause some potential problems in this country, since some intelligence gathered by submarines is also shared. With 12 British submarines out of service for an indefinite period of time, it will lead to some gaps in coverage in vital areas.

Navy spokeswoman Lt. Jensin Sommer said she could not go into detail about what impact the British problems might have on the U.S. submarine force.

"As a matter of routine practice, we don't discuss our submarine operations," Sommer said.

The British submarine recall grew out of an accident aboard the HMS Tireless, a Trafalgar-class submarine that suffered a leak in its reactor cooling system last spring and had to be towed into Gibraltar.

Demlein said he cannot recall a time when U.S. submarines were recalled to port, or even generic problems aside from relatively minor engineering or mechanical problems that might cause unnecessary noise, which are usually fixed when a submarine pulls in for scheduled repairs.

"But they also have a smaller number of submarines," Demlein said, "so it might make more sense to bring them all in at one time." ■

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