



Navy in SOS for American subs

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AMERICAN submarines may be drafted in to protect Britain's Trident missile force while the Royal Navy's entire hunter-killer fleet is out of action because of nuclear reactor problems.

US sources said approaches had been made, seeking co-operation while the Navy's 12 hunter-killers are in dry-dock undergoing intensive safety checks.

Their withdrawal from service cuts the Navy's front-line strength by 25% at a stroke. The Ministry of Defence admitted that all of the boats could be out of action "for some months".

HMS Tireless, the submarine which triggered the crisis over safe operation, has been stranded in Gibraltar since May, and is now the centre of a wider safety row involving the UK and Spain at Prime Ministerial level.

The Herald has learned that three more of the submarines, HMS Sceptre, Spartan, and Sovereign, may never return to active duty because of their age and the problems of repairing pipework in awkward locations near the boats' reactors.

Sceptre has just completed a £200m refit which did not address what the Navy calls "the trouser-leg problem" relating to the narrow access ducts for the cracked pipes in the nuclear coolant system.

The US has 57 conventionally armed but nuclear-powered submarines, which they call "attack boats". Seven or eight are undergoing routine refits which take up to two years to complete, but the others are either at sea or available.

Apart from their intelligence role, the British hunter-killer submarines' main task is to "delouse" the exit route of Trident boats as they leave the Clyde base at Faslane by sweeping the area for signs of potentially hostile intruders.

Throughout the Cold War, there was always at least one Soviet hunter-killer lurking off the Irish coast in the hope of picking up the trail of the then Polaris missile boats and shadowing it to its secret patrol sector.

Russian submarine activity around the UK declined to almost zero after the Soviet Union collapsed. But a few boats from the former Red Banner Fleet at Murmansk have shown up again in recent years, on the same mission. Others have been detected off America's eastern

seaboard.

A spokesman for the MoD said last night: "We filled a gap in overall Western capability in the Mediterranean when the US Sixth Fleet was on another task earlier this year, by sending one of our carriers to the region.

"Some of our own responsibilities can be filled by other assets, such as Nimrod anti-submarine maritime patrol aircraft. If, however, our national capabilities proved difficult to meet, then the US or other allies might have spare capacity to bridge that gap.

"I am not prepared to discuss actual deployments, but I can say that none of the repairs or checks on our submarines will be carried out in US yards."

Retired US Admiral Eugene Carroll, an expert on submarine warfare, said: "The general spirit of the US leadership is that the Cold War is still on. To that end, a primary mission of US and British submarines today is intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

"For that reason, nothing is ever disclosed about deployment schedules, locations, or activities. Any RN request for support would be co-ordinated through the submarine operations centre in Norfolk, Virginia. If it is requested and the request is met, it will remain beneath a blanket of secrecy. It is one of the most sensitive areas of US military operations."

All nuclear attack submarines can monitor military radio traffic and shipping movements from some distance out to sea without betraying their presence.

-Oct 27th

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