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Britain's nuclear submarine fleet 'no longer fit for purpose'

Former Navy chief (!) calls for 'radical' action to revive programme after catastrophic failures



HMS *Victorious* in the Clyde estuary where its homeport is located. **Photo: Mez Merrill**

Britain is "no longer capable" of running a nuclear submarine programme after "catastrophic" failures pushed it to the brink, a former Navy chief has said. Rear Admiral Philip Mathias said the UK's "silent service" was facing an "unprecedented" situation from which it was highly unlikely to recover without radical intervention.

The former director of nuclear policy at the Ministry of Defence said delays in building new attack boats had reached record levels, while the duration of patrols for crews in nuclear-armed submarines had been driven up from 70 days during the Cold War to more than 200 days now.

This had led to a "shockingly low availability" of submarines to "counter the Russian threat in the North Atlantic", the retired submarine commander warned.

The admiral, who led the Trident value for money review in 2010, called for Britain to pull out of the multi-billion Aukus defence deal with America and Australia to build 12 new nuclear submarines. "The UK is no longer capable of managing a nuclear submarine programme," he said.

"Dreadnought is late, Astute class submarine delivery is getting later, there is a massive backlog in Astute class maintenance and refitting, which continues to get worse, and SSN-Aukus is a submarine which is not going to deliver what the UK or Australia needs in terms of capability or timescale.

"Performance across all aspects of the programme continues to get worse in every dimension. This is an unprecedented situation in the nuclear submarine age. It is a catastrophic failure of succession and leadership planning."

He added: "The public should be aware of the gross mismanagement of this hugely expensive and important programme. Our adversaries certainly will be, not least by counting our submarines alongside using satellite imagery and reading audit reports already in the public domain."

The Navy's fleet of Astute submarines is already facing significant problems, with many having been stuck in port for years. Out of the seven planned, six are in service.

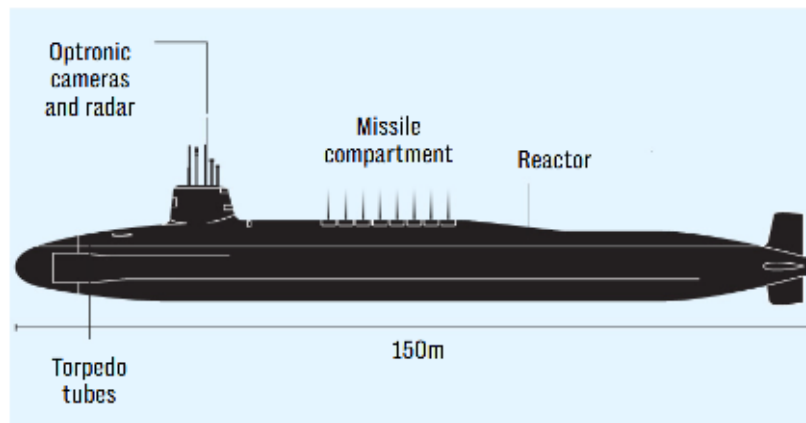
HMS *Ambush* is currently inactive, having spent 1,222 days – more than three years and four months – in port, according to defence analysts.

Sister vessels *Artful* and *Audacious* are undergoing sluggish maintenance programmes, having both spent more than 950 days out of action. *Astute* and *Anson* are also in port.

HMS *Agamemnon*, the sixth and penultimate vessel, entered service in September during a commissioning ceremony led by the King, with ministers hailing it a “truly remarkable manufacturing feat”. But Rear-Adm Mathias said: “The uncomfortable truth is that she took over 13 years to build – the longest-ever construction time for a submarine to be built for the Navy.”

Russia, meanwhile, continues to pressure the Navy, having ramped up its activity in UK waters by more than 30 per cent, John Healey, the Defence Secretary, has warned. Last week, Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, said he was ready to go to war with Europe.

The UK’s nuclear-armed submarine fleet is critical to defending the country and deterring Russia and other dangerous states from using weapons of mass destruction. The fleet of four Vanguard stealth boats carries Britain’s nuclear missiles, with one vessel always patrolling the seas at any time.



Each of the submarines can carry up to 16 Trident 2 D5 60 ton ballistic missiles armed with up to eight individual warheads, the combined destructive power of which dwarfs the bomb dropped on Hiroshima in the Second World War and would wipe out millions of people.

However, the boats have faced problems during launch tests issues in the past. In 2016, one of the 44ft Tridents fired from HMS *Vengeance* veered off course and reportedly self-destructed.

Then at Port Canaveral, Florida, on Jan 30 last year, a missile launched from HMS *Vanguard* misfired and landed back in the sea.

In his critique, Rear-Adm Mathias said Britain’s next generation of nuclear weapon boats, the Dreadnought class, should be the “last class of nuclear-powered submarines that the UK builds”.

He said the Aukus programme should be “cancelled now”, with the money instead spent on better “cost-effective” ways of delivering the same capability but with cheaper tech, like aerial drones or smaller unmanned submarines.

The naval commander pointed towards historic cuts in defence spending, repeated changes to how nuclear submarine programmes are delivered and a “huge failure” to manage key personnel as contributing factors to the decline.

But he also criticised the role of industry giants for delays to programmes and added that not a single one of the UK’s 23 decommissioned nuclear boats had been dismantled since the first, HMS *Dreadnought*, left service in 1980. “This is an utter disgrace and brings into question whether Britain is responsible enough to own nuclear submarines,” he said, adding the details he raised were all publicly available and probably known by Russia.



The Defence Nuclear Enterprise dismantling project in Rosyth, Scotland. **Photo: Andrew Linnett/Ministry of Defence/Crown Copyright**

A defence source insisted the “right people were in the right place” to continue to oversee Britain’s nuclear programme.

The Ministry of Defence said it was committed to delivering the next generation of nuclear submarines, and that the Dreadnought programme remained on track.

It added that it was committed to the safe disposal of old boats and was a responsible nuclear operator, meeting the highest standards of safety, security and environmental protection for the current projects in Devonport and Rosyth and through planning for a future disposal capability in the UK.

A spokesman added: “We are unwavering in our commitment to renewing and maintaining the nuclear deterrent underlined by the biggest sustained investment into defence spending since the end of the Cold War.

“The Strategic Defence Review made clear the need for sustained investment across the Defence Nuclear Enterprise. This will see delivery of the most powerful attack submarines ever operated by the Royal Navy and the investment of £15bn this Parliament into our sovereign warhead programme.” **Source: The Telegraph 06/12**

The proverbial cat amongst the pigeons!

AGS