FOR CIVILISATION

878 Briefing

The Condition of the Royal Navy & the Threat to Britain

Briefing 1. The Submarine Fleet

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Introduction: The Russian threat.

The Royal Navy is gripped by a critical but needless decline in strategic capacity, as demonstrated by a steep reduction in both mass and readiness.

This comes at a time of intensifying maritime competition and growing threats to British national interests. These threats are most acute in and around British waters, as Russia's submarines, warships and even its shadow-fleet carrying illicit Russian oil across the globe, are all increasing their operations off Britain's coasts.

In merely the last few months, the Royal Navy has warned of increased Russian activity around the United Kingdom's waters, after it spent 21 days in July alone monitoring nearby Russian ships. This came as naval operations to monitor Russian activity increased 25 per cent in

July compared to the previous year, with Russian warships making repeated voyages through the Dover Strait and North Sea.[1]

More recently, Ministers confirmed that Moscow is using "commercial proxies" to threaten vital undersea infrastructure, as recent analysis uncovered 500 incidents of Russian civilian vessels loitering above vital undersea cables, part of Russia's tactic of deploying fishing trawlers to spy on the UK's critical undersea cables.[2]

There are serious concerns about the UK's frigate and destroyer fleets, in particular given their low operational deployability to counter this growing Russian activity, plus the navy's transition to reliance on automation through the 'Hybrid Navy' concept.

However, it is in the submarine fleet that we see an especially stark vulnerability and where, due to its purposes, creates unique threats to Britain's security.

The *Astute* class.

The Royal Navy's submarine fleet is composed of two classes of vessels: the Astute-class nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN); and the Vanguard-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), which represent the UK's Continuous At Sea Deterrent (CASD).

The first of the Astute-class boats, HMS Astute, was ordered in March 1997, with the class operational by 2014. There are five vessels, plus another two being readied; one is undergoing sea trials and the second

[1] The Telegraph. (2026). Navy tracks Russian warships in English Channel. Available online at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2026/08/29/navy-tracks-russian-warships-in-english-channel [Last accessed 27 October 2026].
[2] Cotterill, T., et al. (2026). *Exclusive: Putin sends fishing trawlers to spy on Britain*. The Telegraph.
Available online at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2026/10/21/exclusive-putin-sends-fishing-trawlers-to-spy-on-britain/ [Last accessed 27 October 2026].

still under construction. Their two primary roles are anti-submarine warfare, as well as fleet protection for the nuclear-armed Vanguard-class.

Despite maintaining a fleet of five vessels, it was reported that not a single Astute-class submarine was operationally deployed through summer 2026, and that all five remained laid-up in British harbours.[3] Only HMS Agamemnon (one of the two planned additions to the five in service) is at sea conducting trials.

This is deeply concerning, given both the rise in Russian sub-surface activity around British waters, but perhaps more worrying because of the lack of available escorts for Britain's nuclear deterrent.

The *Vanguard* class.

There are four Vanguard-class nuclear attack submarines in total. Due to the nature of their deterrent, HM Government rightly does not comment on their deployment cycles or current state. However, it is widely understood that the fleet has been in a poor state for some years.

The Vanguard-class was originally designed for 3-4 month deployments, spending effectively their entire time at sea deep underwater to avoid sonar detection. Over recent years, there have been instances in which planned under-100-day patrols were extended and even exceeded 200 days.[4] Most SSN- and SSBN-operating navies view 100-day patrols as the sensible maximum; at least the last ten deterrent patrols all exceeded five months in

[3] Navy Lookout. (2026). Royal Navy attack submarine fleet update – all boats alongside. Available online at https://www.navylookout.com/royal-navy-attack-submarine-fleet-update-all-boats-alongside/ [Last accessed 27 October 2026].
[4] Navy Lookout. (2026). Royal Navy nuclear submarine completes longest patrol on record. Available online at https://www.navylookout.com/royal-navy-nuclear-submarine-completes-longest-patrol-on-record/ [Last accessed 27 October 2026].

duration, up until April this year, with the last coming in at over 200 days, apparently becoming the new normal.[5]

While most CASD patrols are only one Vanguard-vessel strong, a second submarine is usually at sea simultaneously for routine sea trials, readying to take over the next patrol, or completing pre-patrol exercises. As of 27th October 2026, there are believed to be three of the four Vanguard-class submarines out at sea, which has not occurred in over five years.[6]

The *Dreadnought* class.

Replacing the aging Vanguard-class, the four incoming Dreadnought-class submarines are scheduled to enter active service sometime in the early 2030s.

However, work already needs to begin to design their replacement: each of the four submarines is designed to operate for 30 years, and their build-time alone will take 20 years, with full operating capability expected by 2030 at the earliest, bringing us closer to 25-30 years in total.

Given the Vanguards' 30 years of planned life, the Ministry of Defence accepted the 2025 Strategic Defence Review's recommendation to begin the early definition and requirement-setting work to start during the current parliamentary term.[7] However, this pledge was only affirmed in July 2026, and there have been no major

[5] Navy Lookout. (2025). Royal Navy Vanguard-class submarine comes home after 203-day patrol. Available online at https://www.navylookout.com/royal-navy-vanguard-class-submarine-comes-home-after-203-day-patrol/ [Last accessed 27 October 2026].
[6] Brown, L. (2026). Three of Britain's four nuclear deterrent submarines put to sea. The Times.
Available online at https://www.thetimes.com/uk/defence/article/three-nuclear-submarines-put-to-sea-z9zmcgqkf [Last accessed 27 October 2026].
[7] Allison, G. (2026). *UK starts defining Dreadnought successor this Parliament.* UK Defence Journal. Available online at https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/uk-starts-defining-dreadnought-successor-this-parliament/ [Last accessed 27 October 2026].

announcements since; with only two full Parliamentary years left before the next General Election must be called, the Government needs to properly commit to Dreadnought's successor at the earliest opportunity.

The *SSN-AUKUS* class.

The UK is in the process of building "up to 12" new SSN-AUKUS attack submarines to replace the current Astute-class fleet, as part of its defence and security partnership with Australia and the United States (which with the UK form AUKUS). Work will begin on these vessels by 2030, with a view to entering service toward the end of the 2030s for the British submarines, and in the 2040s for Australia.

Numerous concerns about the deliverability of the programme remain. The initial steel cutting and formal construction of the first UK SSN-AUKUS submarine is scheduled to begin at BAE Systems, in Barrow-in-Furness, in 2027.[8] Given the likely concurrent Astute and Dreadnought programmes, the sole UK submarine construction site in Barrow-in-Furness risks facing acute labour shortfalls as soon as SSN-AUKUS begins. In the meantime the site has added only about 500 workers against a required 2,500 to run the parallel Dreadnought and SSN-AUKUS build lines.[9]

The projected build-timeframes for SSN-AUKUS are also deeply concerning. Astute-class boats averaged 128 months to build; SSN-AUKUS are projected to take only 18 months each. This feels unrealistic, and risks cost overruns, delays, supply-chain over-stretch, and potentially an even bigger "submarine gap".

[8] Menon, J. (2026). First British SSN-AUKUS submarine to enter production in 2027. Advance. Available online at https://www.adsadvance.co.uk/uk-ssn-aukus-submarine-steel-cut-2027/ [Last accessed 27 October 2026].
[9] Navy Lookout. (2026). Foundations laid for major expansion of the Royal Navy nuclear submarine fleet. Available online at https://www.navylookout.com/foundations-laid-for-major-expansion-of-the-royal-navy-nuclear-submarine-fleet/ [Last accessed 27 October 2026].

The AUKUS partnership is a lynchpin of British strategy in the Indo-Pacific, where the United Kingdom maintains multiple overseas commitments, territories, basing rights and reciprocal trade and security agreements. Furthermore, AUKUS allows for the Royal Navy to become the United States Navy's principal maritime partner in the Indo-Pacific, enabling the UK to contribute meaningfully to maintaining regional stability and freedom of navigation, which is a core national interest to Britain. Merely 'Pillar One' of the AUKUS partnership, the SSN-AUKUS programme must not fail.

However, without guarantees of resource from HM Government that are currently absent, and instead a vague pledge of total vessels built, a lack of political leadership and gaps in the defence-industrial base, Britain risks being the weak link in the partnership.

Recommendations.

(i) For HM Government to fully commit to the Strategic Defence Review and related Defence Investment Plan's highest recommendation for 12 SSN-AUKUS vessels, at the earliest opportunity, likely the spring Spending Review 2027.

(ii) To increase resource allocation for the troubled *Astute*-class submarines, all of which were in docks for a period from June 2026. Increased resources are needed to alleviate maintenance backlogs, industrial bottlenecks, and dockyard infrastructure limitations. Without this, the *Astute*-class must be said to be failing, and with it, Britain's nuclear deterrent risks being left defenceless at sea or dependent upon allies for support, eroding the UK's "sovereign" nuclear deterrent.

(iii) To ensure that two of the five *Astute*-class submarines are fully deployable and indeed operational at all times: one actively patrolling the North Sea, the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) Gap, or English Channel to deter increased Russian submarine activity around British waters; a second always patrolling alongside the CASD.

(iv) The Ministry of Defence should follow up and announce work on the *Dreadnought*'s successor, commissioning the early definition and requirement-setting phase by the close of 2027.