



MENU



A Poseidon aircraft arrives at Kinloss barracks in Moray from Jacksonville, Florida

ALAMY

RAF's new Poseidon sub hunter flies in to thwart Russia

Wednesday February
05 2020, 12.01am
GMT, The Times

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The first of the RAF's new submarine-hunting spy planes has touched down in Britain as part of a £3 billion programme to counter the threat posed by Russian naval activities in the North Atlantic.

Share     Ministers have purchased nine US-designed Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft (MPAs), which are due to start flying missions missions from April and will be fully operational by 2024.

The arrival of the new jet represents the reprisal of a capability Britain has lacked for a decade, after the controversial cost-saving decision to scrap the Nimrods in 2010. In the past ten years the UK has been reliant on US and other western military maritime patrol aircraft.

The first plane, called *Pride of Moray*, arrived at Kinloss barracks from Jacksonville, Florida, yesterday and will monitor the North Atlantic and Arctic region for hostile surface and subsea targets.

Fitted with sensors that use high-resolution area mapping to find

submarines and ships, the aircraft can fly extended surveillance missions at high and low altitudes.

The aircraft collect intelligence on undersea threats by dropping sonobuoys, expendable sonar systems, into the water to listen for enemy vessels. The aircraft will also be armed with Harpoon anti-surface ship missiles and Mk 54 torpedoes capable of attacking surface and sub-surface targets.

The Poseidons, built by Boeing, are primarily designed to protect Britain's continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent and Nato missions across the North Atlantic. The RAF's fleet will operate closely with American and Norwegian Poseidon aircraft.

The arrival of the first plane in the fleet comes as concerns grow about Russian submarine activity in the Atlantic returning to Cold War levels, and Beijing investing heavily in Arctic facilities, infrastructure and ships capable of navigating ice-laden water.

Air Chief Marshal Mike Wigston, head of the RAF, heralded Britain's new spy planes as a "game-changing maritime patrol aircraft" and branded the reacquisition of the capability a direct "response to increasing Russian adventurism both across mainland Europe and in the North Atlantic".

He warned that "Russian submarines have nowhere to hide", but highlighted that Moscow is "not playing by the rules" in the skies either. Often when Russia aircraft fly in British and Nato airspace "they don't have any identification equipment on, so they are a threat

to civil aviation”, he said.

In October Moscow launched its largest submarine deployment in about three decades, sending a stark message to the West about its resurgent subsea force. Ten submarines, including eight nuclear-powered boats, set out from Murmansk and were involved in exercises spanning the Barents Sea, Norwegian Sea and North Atlantic, according to Norwegian intelligence.

Designed to prove Russia’s ability to position its most dangerous submarines adjacent to the east coast of the US, the manoeuvres also tested the boats’ stealth capability by monitoring Nato’s ability to track them.

The successful test launch last autumn of an intercontinental ballistic missile from *Prince Vladimir*, Russia’s latest generation nuclear-powered submarine, has also fuelled concerns in the West. The Bulava missile was fired from the White Sea and travelled thousands of kilometres, according to the Russian defence ministry.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan, the British armed forces minister, said that Moscow’s “aggressive and threatening behaviour is unacceptable to the international norms”.

Hailing the arrival of the first Poseidon aircraft, she added: “This technology means we are even more capable and stronger in being able to offer that continuous service to make sure the Russians are fully aware we know exactly where they are and what they are doing.” Britain will “not stand by if peace in the Arctic region is threatened”, she said.

Last week Admiral Tony Radakin, the first Sea Lord, highlighted the

threat to undersea cables from hostile actors. “Ninety-nine per cent of the world’s data travels around the world in undersea cables, and that these are vulnerable to mines and to submarines - and to relatively cheap methods of interference,” he said.

“We all know that data ranges from people’s internet searches, and video streaming to the information travelling to and from stock exchanges and industry. And we all know that potential financial impact of losing those connections . . . Protecting those assets is becoming even more important than necessarily just protecting physical trade.”

The escalating Kremlin aggression in the sea has prompted calls for the government to increase its order of Poseidons from nine to 16, with advocates pointing out that the British military maintained 40 Nimrods during the 1970s.

Asked whether the UK had procured enough spy planes, Air Vice Marshal Harvey Smyth said: “If we look what activity we’re seeing from Russia, especially as they flex their muscles a little bit more — we’re seeing more and more activity from their navy, both on the surface and particularly sub-surface — it is definitely a question worth asking and for us to do a bit more work on.”

He described the Poseidon as “a great big 737 flying iPhone” and said that it would be easier to upgrade than previous generations of aircraft that required hardware changes. “If you want to upgrade it [the Poseidon], you upload the next iOS. It’s all about software and mission data,” he said.

RAF crews who flew the predecessor aircraft have been embedded

with other maritime patrol squadrons around the world to maintain their skills.

Sidharth Kaushal, research fellow in sea power at the London-based Royal United Services Institute, said Nato anti-submarine warfare capabilities had “atrophied” since the Cold War, an issue exacerbated by the US navy increasingly dividing its forces between Europe and east Asia.

“The lack of any MPAs since the Nimrod was retired in 2010 has made monitoring the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap quite a challenge given that anti-submarine warfare is a team effort between surface vessels, patrol aircraft and friendly submarines sharing data and managing the threat collectively,” he said.

“This gap in capacity was underscored in 2015 when the UK had to request allied assistance to track a suspected Russian submarine incursion near Faslane. An aircraft like the P-8A with a highly credible sensor suite and the fuel capacity to patrol for submarines at long ranges will — especially in tandem with the arrival of the Type 26 frigates — go a long way towards closing this gap in ASW capability.”

The final Poseidon will be delivered by the end of next year and the squadron will reach full operating capability by 2024. Their permanent home will be the strategically important base RAF Lossiemouth, in Moray, north Scotland.

Four Typhoon squadrons, half the RAF’s fleet of the aircraft, are also based at Lossiemouth, where about 2,000 personnel are stationed. While the base is undergoing a £450 million renovation the Poseidon aircraft will fly from Kinloss barracks.

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