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Royal Navy Advances Submarine-Launched Drone Capability

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The United Kingdom Royal Navy has taken a significant step forward in underwater warfare development, completing a second trial of launching and recovering an uncrewed underwater vehicle (UUV) from a submarine's torpedo tube. The milestone trial supports the service's move toward a modernised, hybrid fleet that integrates crewed platforms with autonomous systems to expand its underwater capabilities.

Conducted in the Mediterranean, the test involved an Astute-class nuclear-powered attack submarine. It was part of Project Scylla, a national initiative focused on developing torpedo tube launch-and-recovery (TTL&R) capabilities. The trial marked a key phase in expanding the operational envelope of submarines by enabling them to deploy autonomous vehicles for missions such as seabed surveillance, reconnaissance, and underwater communications.

The Royal Navy confirmed this was the second in-water test following a similar exercise in November 2024, also using an Astute-class vessel. According to a spokesperson quoted by Naval News, “Development of Project Scylla has been an ongoing endeavour encompassing both at-sea and shore-side trial elements.”

The latest trial was conducted by the United Kingdom Submarine Delivery Agency’s Autonomy Unit in collaboration with L3Harris Technologies. The team utilised an Iver4 uncrewed underwater vehicle from the company’s commercial portfolio. The successful test illustrated the speed and effectiveness of capability development through international cooperation.

“This is a big step forward in delivering new capability to the submarine service,” said Commodore Marcus Rose, Deputy Director for Underwater Battlespace Capabilities. “Delivery of these trials demonstrates our commitment to the use of advanced capabilities as part of a future ‘hybrid fleet’.”

The broader strategy falls under the Royal Navy’s “Atlantic Bastion” concept, designed to strengthen deterrence and defence in the North Atlantic. By integrating unmanned underwater vehicles with manned submarines, the Navy is developing a layered approach to anti-submarine warfare (ASW), thereby enhancing its ability to monitor vast underwater areas critical to national security and NATO interests.

The recently published 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) supports this shift toward autonomous capabilities, highlighting the growing role of nuclear-powered attack submarines and underwater drones in future conflict environments. The approach prioritises deploying UUVs for high-risk and surveillance tasks, allowing submarines to focus on tracking and neutralising enemy targets.

The United States Navy has already deployed a similar TTL&R system onboard its Virginia-class submarine USS Delaware, using a REMUS 600 UUV also known as the Yellow Moray.

Trials aboard older Los Angeles-class submarines have also taken place. This development aligns with the United States' aim of making such capabilities standard across its fleet.

As threats beneath the surface continue to grow, particularly in contested waters like the North Atlantic and Arctic Ocean, the integration of UUVs with nuclear-powered submarines offers a strategic edge. It allows NATO allies to stretch their sensing reach, cover key chokepoints, and protect critical underwater infrastructure without compromising the stealth and versatility of their manned platforms.

The success of the United Kingdom's latest trial not only showcases technological advancement but also reinforces the role of trusted defence partnerships in countering shared threats.