

# STORM

## WARNING FOR THE


# ROYAL NAVY





***A decade of over-use and neglect has placed the world's oldest navy, and the U.S. Navy's presumed closest partner, at a critical decision point. What can the Royal Navy do to stay afloat?***

**By Vice Admiral Sir Jeremy Blackham,  
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**T**here may be trouble ahead. Pick up your binoculars and scan the horizon: it has become significantly darker in recent times. Sir Richard Dannatt, head of the British Army, recently told the public to prepare for a generation of conflict. We agree with him. In addition to the substantial threat of unconditional terrorism, a variety of problematic regimes from Russia to the Middle East, Central Asia, and West Africa have the ability to hold Britain hostage over access to food, energy, and raw materials.

Since 9/11, strategic risk assessment usually starts with the now-familiar threats from unconditional Islamist terror that have replaced bombs and Russians as prime public concerns in international affairs. Maritime traffic surveillance and interdiction are a huge and invisible part of pre-empting terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction. General Dannatt also observed that Islamist terrorism connects to Western energy insecurity through various regimes in the Middle East and Central Asia that are hostile to the West. Further, French President Nicolas Sarkozy most clearly stated in his first major statement

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on foreign affairs that these threats have Iranian nuclear dimensions with all the associated unpalatable choices.

Latent threats to British food security, absent for two generations, also loom, in part because of the downgrading of the strategic status of domestic food production, loss of domestic fisheries, and the loss of Britain's special status in the antipodean markets. Both energy and food security also have maritime leading edges.

Furthermore, geostrategically Britain is located at the center of the world. Take a compass pivoting on the Thames estuary and radius to the Cape of Good Hope. The circle it sweeps embraces most of the people on earth. The geostrategic influence of the sea lanes does not change, and for the West, the control of the Panama and Suez canals and their approaches, the five key global choke points (English Channel, Gibraltar, Red Sea, Strait of Hormuz, Malacca Strait), and the two Cape passages (Horn and Good Hope) which lock up the world, remain undiminished priorities.

The British people therefore remain as dependent as ever, and arguably more so, on maritime trade. But because their personal links to seafaring are now minimal, paradoxically, awareness of this dependence has shrunk. They suffer from sea-blindness. The 2007 beaching of a random cargo ship off the East Devon coast and the astonishing range of goods that spilled out of the *MV Napoli* onto Branscombe Beach were front-page object lessons for the public in its dependence on sea transport for most consumer goods. They may not be interested in sea power, but sea power is very interested in them.

To this general picture is added another, more specific and more recent. The explosion of economic activity in India and China will put further pressure on energy resources, food supplies, and maritime traffic to meet their needs. Around 80 percent of a growing fossil fuel volume goes by sea, and much of the oil and liquified natural gas in this goes to the West. Pressures in tight markets all around are produced by recent Chinese (and soon Indian) demand for all commodities as the demographic superpowers of the 21st century aspire to, and single-mindedly pursue, Western standards of living.

China's take-off is a principal unintended consequence of 9/11, which halted the then-abrupt deterioration in Sino-American relations. However, China's rapidly growing use of indigenous coal (8.7 percent p.a. accounting for 70 percent of growth in global coal use) gives the West an asymmetric vulnerability that demands maritime protection. The demonstrated growth and the expected future growth in Indian and Chinese naval power may intensify the requirement for expeditionary intervention operations. The seabed remains largely unexplored, but exploration may well yield important resources that are very likely to be causes of dispute, thus heightening concerns over maritime security. Russia's peculiar submarine flag-planting expedition to the North Pole last summer illustrates this.

### Three Needs and Two Announcements

Leaving aside the long-range problems of climate change or pandemic diseases, these medium-term likeli-

hoods already promise a more unpredictable world. In the case of maritime activity, it is creating a range of growing and interconnected tasks that demand a substantial investment in maritime security. But in Britain today this is not occurring. To confront the challenges of this dark future, the Royal Navy must, as a minimum, be able to:

- contribute as the second most powerful navy to collective Western global maritime security, power projection, and interdiction capability, and therefore maintain its carrier and amphibious capability with appropriate support forces;
- provide and support substantial and secure sea bases for joint expeditionary operations;
- provide adequate forces for a full range of the UK's Exclusive Economic Zone, and wider security and interdiction tasks. Today, it would not be possible to support all these tasks with present force levels, let alone with less.

Nine years have passed since the the Labour government's Strategic Defence Review proclaimed the need to renew Britain's aircraft carrier capability. This summer, as the country's armed forces struggled because of an inadequate core budget and reduced establishments to sustain two unanticipated medium-scale overseas operations of indeterminate duration on top of many smaller commitments, Prime Minister Gordon Brown made two announcements specifically about the Royal Navy.

The first was that, insofar as the Westminster Parliament can prescribe it, the Royal Navy would retain all three



**NEW CARRIERS, BUT WHEN?** On the day that *HMS Queen Elizabeth* and *Prince of Wales* finally join the Royal Navy, they will have been in planning, design, and construction for longer than twice the length of World War II. In the meantime, the elderly VSTOL carriers must go on exercises without their own embarked aircraft.

of its major bases. Two are in England at Devonport and Portsmouth and one is at Faslane in Scotland. But the closure of Faslane is a policy of the current governing Scottish Nationalist party in the rapidly devolving Scottish Parliament because of its opposition to the British ballistic-missile submarine force based there.

Do not assume it could not happen.

While closure of Portsmouth was feared by some informed sources, it did not occur, in part because of the other announcement which was that an order might soon be placed for the two carriers, HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and *Prince of Wales*. The announcement was not the order; it was merely the expectation of an order that we anticipate sometime soon. We also expect that by the time they are eventually commissioned, these new carriers will have been in planning, design and construction for longer than twice the length of World War II! In the meantime, because of this leisurely procurement, the fleet sails exposed to risk because the elderly VSTOL carriers, run on beyond their planned career spans, have been stripped of their anti-air warfare Harrier force, and the Type 45 *Daring*-class anti-air warfare destroyer is not yet in service. HMS *Invincible* recently went on exercise with the U.S. Navy without its own embarked aircraft.

## The Proper Nature of Strategy

So, with the renewed promise of two large carriers and the Joint Strike Fighter (once its weight and related troubles are resolved), is the world's oldest navy now plotting a confident course into the murky and troubled waters of 21st century geopolitics? Or is the Royal Navy still at the brink? Earlier this year, we wrote in the Royal United Services Institute journal that the Royal Navy "risks losing irretrievably the capability which it has had since before Nelson but especially from the time of Trafalgar to the present, to be a decisive force across the globe." We observed that only the French would retain that ability among European nations. Does the renewal of the promise to order two aircraft carriers invalidate our earlier concerns?

Ordering two carriers is not a strategy any more than buying a frozen chicken is cordon bleu cuisine. Yet senior figures in the British defense and political community do not seem to understand that difference. What, after all, is

the essential capability without which you have no navy? Not ships; not people; not bases; not even traditions and organizational forms. "The fundamental element of a military service," wrote Samuel P. Huntington in a May 1954 *Proceedings* article, "is its purpose or role in implementing

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national policy. The statement of this role may be called the strategic concept of the service. . . . If a military service does not possess such a concept, it becomes purposeless . . . and ultimately it suffers both physical and moral degeneration." Astonishing as it may seem to an American readership, as it is to us, Britain currently risks losing a hard-headed sense of its national interests—a loss of nerve, one should firmly notice, from which our Islamist enemies do not suffer—at a time when the scale of maritime risks and threats to general Western security is sharply increasing.

Additionally, maritime force has always had a special utility in times of general and multiple risks. It comes precisely from its capacity—which it possesses more than other forms of military force—to position globally, poise motionless, and provide silent but visible presence without any specific threat while at the same time being able to react quickly to changing circumstances.

But this case is not being made clearly enough. It is of course part of a strategic concept, and therefore not readily reducible to targets, performance indicators, and "value for money" assessments derived from them, which are the dominant management tools of the accountant's mentality that now runs the British Ministry of Defence. This "Accountant's Fallacy" is one of several afflicting British defense policy. The Royal Navy is at the brink for more reasons than overstretched people manning insufficient, worn, and diminishing stocks of equipment faced with rising numbers of missions during the last ten years. Our anxiety about these is matched by a more general anxiety about the poverty of maritime strategic thinking.

## Our Peers Understand

This lack of attention both to maritime thinking and to naval procurement is in contrast to the intellectual and material resources being devoted to both in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, notably by Australia, China, India, and Japan. The Royal Australian Navy is in a strong growth phase. Japan has a large and balanced regional fleet. The People's Liberation Army Navy is growing fast in all departments, especially submarines and, prospectively, naval aviation. India currently has 35 ships building, including one new and one renovated carrier. Speaking at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in June 2007, Admiral Sureesh Mehta, Chief of Naval Staff of the Indian Navy, explained that India's strategic concept now exceeds a preoccupation with regional political tensions.





**A SHRINKING FLEET** As the number of destroyers and frigates in the Royal Navy drops, the age of those still in service continues to creep up, and even the six *Daring*-class destroyers on order won't change that. The authors warn that, without enough of these ship types, the Royal Navy will lose the most visible face of maritime capability.

It fully recognizes that the sub-continent is at the center of vast maritime activity (100,000 vessels a year passing the coasts of India) on which its future prosperity and security depend. He placed India's maritime security requirements within its regional and global competition for markets and resources, especially with China. In short, a modern industrial nation is by definition a maritime nation, and the expansion of the Indian Navy is the material expression of that strategic priority.

Admiral Mehta is echoing Huntington's message from 50 years ago: "A second element of a military service is the resources, human and material, which are required to implement its strategic concept." But, Huntington reminded us, the two elements—concept and its realization—are indissolubly linked in a democracy because, "to secure those resources it is necessary for society to forego the alternative uses to which those resources might be put. . . . Thus, the resources which a service is able to obtain . . . are a function of the *public support* of that service." This underlines our view that a shopping list is not a strategy, and the failure to make a coherent strategic case for maritime force in Britain is now displayed in the actual state and, more especially, in the committed future trends of the Royal Navy.

This judgment will certainly be challenged. Officials will remind us that 28 ships have joined the fleet during the ten years of the present government. But this figure requires further scrutiny before it becomes meaningful. First, only 8 ships have been ordered since 1997, but more significant than that, only 4 of the 28 were destroyers or frigates (DD/FF). This is the key number because to sustain a force of 25 DD/FF as announced in 2004 requires a minimum build rate of at least one ship per year, assuming a 25-year life—itsself something of a gamble, given the speed of technological development. Current published plans envisage only 5 more DD/FF entering service before 2017, assuming that 8 Type 45s are eventually built. In

that same ten-year period since 1997, of 57 ships disposed of, 13 were DD/FF, some considerably younger than the ships retained (e.g., in 2005 HMS *Norfolk* [15 years], *Marlborough* [14]; in 2006 HMS *Grafton* [10]).

### The Future Royal Navy Sold Short

The hemorrhage of numbers of DD/FF, down from the 32 specified in the Strategic Defence Review, has been justified with the "Technology Fallacy." This asserts that the improved capability inherent in each modern unit renders obsolete the old-fashioned view that numbers matter. This strategically illiterate opinion ignores the obvious fact that one ship, however capable, can only be in one place at one time; and the rising importance of presence missions demands many, many more hulls. It also ignores the fact that the opposition's capability also improves with time.

On this formal logic, we believe that the future is being sold short. Just as the current Navy is the product of Navy Board decisions made 20 years ago, so today's build rate will determine the fleet 20 years hence. It takes time to build ships. The record of the last decade speaks for itself. The low building rate since 1997 has been unprecedented since well before World War I. It has been *even lower* than it was during the Treaty restricted years 1921-36. (See table)

By 2003, all DD/FF ordered by the previous government were in service; the Royal Navy has received none since then. By the time all six Type 45s presently on order enter service in 2014, the commissioning rate for the period 2003-14 will be one ship every two years. Given a nominal service life of 25 years this implies a DD/FF force of about a dozen ships. The steep drop in numbers is matched by dramatic aging of the fleet. In 1997 the average age of the DD/FF force was a little under 10 years. Today it is almost 17 and by 2010 it will be 19. Why do we emphasize the importance of destroyers and frigates? Because without

these classes of ship, and the capabilities they represent, the fleet loses its principal patrolling, maritime security, escorting, joint sea-base protection, and littoral effect-capability. They are, in fact, the glue which holds the fleet together; the most visible face of maritime capability.

## What is to be Done?

So what should be done? The nature and number of the future class of surface combatant will be pivotal. It will decide the direction of the Royal Navy for the next generation. It must rebuild numbers from the present low point.

What should this class of ship provide? Above all, a coherent operational, global footprint: in other words, numbers. It is also a sound principle that you should train where you may have to fight, and for this the Royal Navy is already spread *much* too thin. The minimum numbers

we think the Royal Navy should have are 30—a 10:20 mix: 10 first raters and 20 second raters. Those numbers are driven by geostrategic givens (the interwar fleet deployed 60 ships for blue water stations) and would restore a viable industrial drumbeat. Regular *Proceedings* columnist Professor Norman Friedman also argues for the Royal Navy to acquire a mix of modular frigates. In the war against terrorists, he observes, the sea-based denial of sanctuary is of rising importance and this requires large numbers of ships capable of independent deployment.

In principle, variants of these ships should be capable of light surface action (interdiction), land attack, amphibious support, limited ASW, mine countermeasures, electronic intelligence gathering, and networked area detection and communications. So we shall need some creative naval architecture to accommodate all these missions, using the best potentials of modularity and ship design, pioneered,

Professor Friedman reminds us, by the Royal Danish Navy's StanFlex ships. These future frigates need to be large and simple and produced in volume. Friedman usefully directs the Royal Navy to the U.S. Navy's *Spruance* class for a good example of a design that can provide the modularity and numbers needed to complement the "high end" provided by power projection groups.

This article is a storm warning. In the nature of a warning, it gives time to prepare. It is an integral part of the duty of those charged with responsibility for our armed forces not simply to expend in current operations the legacy which they received from their predecessors but also to give their successors enough core capability to meet future missions, of which the most important is the predictable arrival of the unpredicted. And so? Let's face the music and dance. . . . ❄️

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**Commissioning Rates Royal Navy Cruisers And Destroyers 1918-1936; Commissioning Rates Rn Destroyers And Frigates 1980-2008**

| Year  | Cruisers | Destroyer Leaders & Destroyers | Year  | Destroyers & Frigates |
|-------|----------|--------------------------------|-------|-----------------------|
| 1918  | 7        | 57                             | 1980  | 2                     |
| 1919  | 7        | 33                             | 1981  | 2                     |
| 1920  | 1        | 3                              | 1982  | 3                     |
| 1921  | 1        | 0                              | 1983  | 1                     |
| 1922  | 3        | 2                              | 1984  | 2                     |
| 1923  | 0        | 1                              | 1985  | 3                     |
| 1924  | 1        | 4                              | 1986  | 1                     |
| 1925  | 1        | 1                              | 1987  | 1                     |
| 1926  | 2        | 2                              | 1988  | 3                     |
| 1927  | 0        | 0                              | 1989  | 2                     |
| 1928  | 5        | 0                              | 1990  | 2                     |
| 1929  | 4        | 0                              | 1991  | 2                     |
| 1930  | 3        | 8                              | 1992  | 1                     |
| 1931  | 1        | 10                             | 1993  | 2                     |
| 1932  | 0        | 5                              | 1994  | 3                     |
| 1933  | 2        | 5                              | 1995  | 1                     |
| 1934  | 2        | 10                             | 1996  | 1                     |
| 1935  | 3        | 8                              | 1997  | 2                     |
| 1936  | 2        | 17                             | 1998  | 0                     |
| Total | 45       | 166                            | 1999  | 0                     |
|       |          |                                | 2000  | 1                     |
|       |          |                                | 2001  | 1                     |
|       |          |                                | 2002  | 1                     |
|       |          |                                | 2003  | 0                     |
|       |          |                                | 2004  | 0                     |
|       |          |                                | 2005  | 0                     |
|       |          |                                | 2006  | 0                     |
|       |          |                                | 2007  | 0                     |
|       |          |                                | 2008  | 0                     |
|       |          |                                | Total | 37                    |

Five Power Washington Naval Treaty—negotiated November 1921-February 1922  
 London Naval Treaty—five powers agree to extend capital ship moratorium to 1937, but the Axis powers start to cheat  
 Second London Naval Treaty—nugatory without Japan, Germany and Italy  
 Sources: *Jane's Fighting Ships 1919, 1930, 1939, 1991-92, 2002-2003, 2006-2007*  
 Alan Raven & John Roberts *British Cruisers of World War Two* Arms & Armour Press London 1980