

# The Royal Navy at the Brink

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Since General Richard Dannatt, the Chief of the General Staff, chose to speak publicly of his fear that the Army could be broken in the pincers of shrinking resources and relentless demands, the general crisis in the British armed forces that has been brewing for a decade, has burst into the open. It does not only affect the Army. This essay reflects upon that crisis as it affects the Royal Navy (RN); for the Navy stands at the brink. Decisions taken in 2007 could well decide whether the RN loses such critical mass in key areas already stretched thin – men, equipment, funds, morale – that it will become one small navy among many. It risks losing irretrievably the capacity 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. Thereafter, in numbers and types of ships, France would possess the only European navy physically able to aspire to that ability.

The First Sea Lord has made it trenchantly plain that he will not allow such a situation to occur on his watch. In February 2007, he was quoted in the *Daily Telegraph* as saying at a lunch for defence correspondents that looming cuts threaten to turn the RN into 'the Belgian Navy'. He argued that it was in the national interest to keep a Navy strong enough to protect our global shipping and capable enough to signify to the Americans.<sup>1</sup> But what exactly needs to happen to preserve this? And what exactly are the key threats to the future viability of the Navy which the First Sea Lord might have in mind? He stated clearly that the prompt construction of the two new aircraft carriers, HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and HMS

*Prince of Wales* that have now been in planning and design for twice the duration of the Second World War, was non-negotiable for him. But does the issue go further? Three early critical battles are flagged below. What Admiral Jonathon Band seems to be signalling is a crisis for the Navy. Circumstance so conspires that he and this Navy Board have the awkward privilege of facing their most fundamental duty as guardian of the future Navy. He calls for a national debate on what sort of military the nation wants.

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As well as there being a democratic imperative, there is also a vital, practical justification for bringing the public into this debate for which the First Sea Lord calls. In the event that force must be used to secure the Realm, then of course it must prevail. Therefore, there is a strategic requirement for unity of purpose and of effort: it is a prerequisite for victory. This was well expressed by Clausewitz in the 'paradoxical trinity' of Passion, Talent and Reason located in the People, Armed Forces and State, respectively. The political aim of war is



HMS *Grafton*, the youngest of the warships sold to Chile in the most recent Fleet cuts, is saluted on her farewell visit to Ipswich, her adoptive town. Photo by Kate Arkell/Courtesy of BBC Suffolk

given by government, he wrote, and the courage and talent to overcome the omnipresent friction of war and to tame the searching and indifferent play of chance, is the commander's realm. But 'the passions that are to be kindled in war must already be inherent in the people.' The armed forces therefore must have relationships to both of the others – to the Government-of-the-day and to the people – and they are different relationships in their natures: 'These three tendencies are like three different codes of law, deep rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another.' For Clausewitz, a victorious strategy is achieved by maintaining 'a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets.'<sup>2</sup> Maintaining a balance implies continuous and sensitive adjustment.

We are behaving irrationally. The RN has been under rising operational

demands for a decade as part of the expeditionary policies set out in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, the forces for which have never been fully funded or procured. The Navy has, in fact, experienced several significant reductions in force levels at odds with SDR, which called for thirty-two surface combatants and ten SSNs (nuclear hunter-killer submarines). Some further cuts were made in 2004 against strategic judgement, in part 'to preserve the CVF (aircraft carrier).' On current evidence, we cannot wholly discount the possibility of cancellation or lengthy postponement of the CVF. In 2007 to meet the short-term financial difficulties of other Top Level Budgets, the Navy seems once again to be facing pressure for significant reductions in force structure and readiness, as well as in key infrastructure. The irrationality in the Navy's case is painfully paradoxical. It arises from the admirable 'can do'

spirit of the Senior Service, silent even under great stress, which has disguised the accumulating crisis of the last decade from the public. The public being unaware until this late moment, this has also made it more difficult to cure.

The public for its part inevitably sees little of the Navy in action. But it feels under threat from many sides and wants to be defended from the things that it fears, like unconditional terrorism. It cannot understand why the RN favours very few very high capability ships which appear only to contribute limited *military* capability in lower probability high intensity/impact coalition operations, at the expense of the numbers of ships required for the more cogent tasks demanded by the current and future strategic context.

Reductions in prospect will complicate or even prevent future expansion of the Royal Navy in response

to the foreseeable inevitability of unforeseeable changed strategic circumstances. Irreversible decisions taken now will impact heavily on the future both of the Navy and of the Nation. The message of this essay is therefore that the Navy faces exceptional circumstances that warrant robust and exceptional action in the national interest. In some respects, today's situation is analogous to that of the 1930s when gathering threats compelled the nation to an urgent rearmament programme. The difference is that it will be much more difficult today, as we will show. This argument also applies equally to the other two Services, of course. Although this essay concerns itself only with the Navy, it in no sense should be read as belittling the gravity of the problems facing the other two. This, we repeat, is a general crisis with component parts.

***This goes to the heart of the dysfunctionality of the contemporary MoD. . . it is at war employing a peace-time (accountant's) mentality***

If the debate is to be realistically framed, then the Navy's first responsibility is to ensure that the terms of the debate are correctly anchored to the corner of Clausewitz' Trinity which it shares with the other armed forces and that the debate is stated in correctly strategic terms. So that voice must be authentic. 'Admirals' logic' should trump 'accountants' logic.' That is not to deny the value of accountants' logic; merely to demand that it be kept in its proper, subordinate place. This goes to the heart of the dysfunctionality of the contemporary Ministry of Defence (MoD). As its behaviour over the current Afghan operations in its generally inept support of General Richards' campaign plan of 2006 has publicly shown, it is at

war employing a peace-time (accountants') mentality.

**Five Fallacies**

That mentality has popularized five fallacies which point up the threat to the Navy and to its sister services:

- 1) The fallacy that technological quality can substitute for the quality that numbers alone can give.** This fallacy is a product of ignorance of history in general and of military history in particular. It is also a product of ignorance of the principles of strategy. If sufficient means are not given to permit force to be used in a way that the public likes, then harsher ways may have to be employed to leverage smaller means to achieve a specified end. It is also a product of misplaced confidence in the powers of technology. This fallacy is especially common in discussion of the necessary numbers of ships.
- 2) The fallacy that usable assessment of strategic and geo-political issues can be achieved by scientific means alone.** There is no good example of successful institutional prediction of the future twenty years ahead. Few people in 1986 were able to foresee and plan for today's strategic environment. Yet now the world is changing even more rapidly and unpredictably. But within the MoD, instruments such as SAG (Studies Advisory Group) Scenarios and the procedures and weights attached to them, and methodologically inappropriate use of Operational Analysis, are part of the procedures that determine the nature and shape of future force requirements. They offer no autonomous insight. They give the appearance only of systematic thought. They cannot substitute for the exercise of professional judgement. Rather, they have become part of a 'check list' culture of procurement, often imposing bureaucratic drag, as one of the authors saw in detail from his experience in creating the Equipment Capability area in MoD. In short, they are no longer 'fit for purpose.' A root and branch re-evaluation of all such methods is needed.
- 3) The fallacy that the driving tempo of this Ministry should be set by the**

**general budget round.** Defence is not an equal partner with other Departments, most of which are products of the proliferation of newer mandates, few older than the early twentieth century. The two prime expressions of a democratic State's contract with its citizens are the night-watchman functions; and to defend the citizen against the enemy without and the enemy within: to protect the citizen's freedom to live quietly and privately within the law. That contract underpins the moral case for taxation of the citizen by the State. The needs of the night-watchmen trump all other calls upon taxation revenue, a judgement supported by the way that the term 'security' is often attached to other forms of government activity as a way of subliminally making their claim for priority.

**4) The fallacy that 'jointness' above the tactical level is a form of more advanced strategic thought or posture than insights or postures composed from well-integrated but different services.** Whitehall 'jointness' has become a homogenizing, levelling-down agent in the hands of process-obsessed bureaucracies. The Mountbatten model of the MoD is now broken and has run its course. Mostly, the ranks of the Ministry's civil servants now march to a different drum than one beaten by the Services. 'Jointness' has become a tool for denigrating the professional skills of the military expert by blurring lines of authority between uniformed and civilian inhabitants of the Main Building. It has bred resentment and is visible in a breakdown of trust. 'Jointness' has become a tool for cost-cutting more than an enabler of military effectiveness. A fresh conceptualization – and operationalization – of 'jointness' is now required that will return to a more evidence-based understanding of warfare.

**5) The fallacy that the military needs of the future will be defined by an extrapolation of the operational imperatives of today.** History is sadly replete with examples of the consequences of such extrapolation. One

must hope that it will not take defeat of British forces in the field to shake apart this frame of thinking. However, incredibly, that is now a credible possibility, given contemporary world affairs.

### The Geostrategic Frame of the Naval Case 2007

Since SDR, the strategic horizon has become significantly darker. 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 the Nation 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 which 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 Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Islamist terror connects to latent Western energy insecurity via various sorts of regimes hostile to the West in the Middle East and central Asia, and with nuclear dimensions accumulating. The seabed remains largely unexplored, but exploration may well yield important resources within the common heritage, which are very likely to be causes of dispute. Latent threats to British food security, absent for two generations, also loom, in part in consequence 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 centre of the people of the world.

Take a compass pivoting on the Thames estuary and radius to the Cape of Good Hope. The circle it then sweeps embraces most of the people on earth. This correctly states the prospect of war among the people. It has a huge and ineradicable maritime dimension, but it also tells the new air/land/sea story that will renovate the concept of 'joint'

operations (see Fallacy 4 above).<sup>3</sup> The three envelopes are inextricably interconnected. If Great Britain is the Keep, then the Bailey is no longer the Channel: it is the cursor between the German and Russian spheres of influence; and the Moat extends to the ends of the earth. All must be engaged if any is to be kept safe. In so doing, the geostrategic influence of the sea-lanes does not change, and for the West, the control of the two ship canals (Panama and Suez) and their approaches, the five key choke points (Channel; Gibraltar; Red Sea; Hormuz; Malacca Straits) and the two Cape passages (Horn and Good Hope) which lock up the world, are 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 also. They suffer from sea-blindness.<sup>4</sup>

To this general picture is added another, more specific and more recent. The explosion of economic activity in the demographic superpowers of India and China will put further pressure on energy resources, food supplies and maritime traffic to supply both (around 80 per cent of fossil fuel goes by sea). Pressures in tight markets all around are produced by recent Chinese and soon Indian demand for all commodities as the demographic superpowers of the twenty-first 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. The Indian and Chinese PLA Navies are growing quickly. Both are adding significant surface combatant and maritime air capability potentials. In India a new aircraft carrier is building with IOC (initial operating capability) 2011, together with around *thirty* other warships. In the Chinese case, re-building is thought to be the most likely initial route, through discreet reactivation of former Soviet/Ukrainian vessel, the *Varyag* (Kuznetsov class from the final days of the USSR) thus adding to its already considerable submarine navy.<sup>5</sup>

The demonstrated growth and the expected future growth in Indian and Chinese naval power may intensify the impact of the issues indicated in the general picture, both with respect to the requirement for expeditionary intervention operations and that for maritime security. This demonstrates the need for the RN to continue to maintain its power projection forces but also for increased patrolling and large-scale sea-basing to underpin sovereign and coalition actions and to bear our proper share of the communal burden, now and in the future.

Leaving aside the long wave problems of climate change or pandemic diseases, these medium-term likelihoods already promise a more unpredictable world. In the case of maritime activity, it is creating a range of growing and interlaced tasks which demand a much greater investment in maritime security. Specifically, if it is to remain a Navy able to do geostrategically the range of tasks that this Nation has required for centuries, the RN must – as a minimum – be able to (a) continue to contribute as the second most powerful navy to the collective Western global maritime security, power projection and interdiction capability and so to maintain its CVF and Amphibious capability, with appropriate support forces; (b) provide and support substantial and secure sea bases (plural) for joint expeditionary operations; (c) provide adequate forces for a full range of UK EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone), and wider, security and interdiction tasks. Today, it would not be possible to support all these tasks concurrently – which is a credible possibility – even with present force levels, let alone with less.

### Three Critical Battles are Looming

Taking account of this thumbnail sketch of the geostrategic frame, and of the five fallacies which distort current perspectives within the Ministry, there are three specific and immediate battles that the RN had better prepare to fight and to win if it hopes to meet the minimum prescription just given. All resonate with other public and political concerns about employment and local

economics. These three areas are the shape and size of the surface combatant fleet, the defence industrial capacity to maintain and to surge the fleet as a whole and the shape and size of the naval base infrastructure, manpower and skills to support the fleet as a whole.

**a) The Surface Fleet.** Resisting reductions in the size of the Fleet has been made more difficult by Fallacy One – the argument constantly made that one modern unit is the equivalent of many earlier units and it is therefore safe to cut numbers because improvements in capability more than off-set the cuts. But the fallacy within this argument is that even the most capable ship can only be in one place at a time. Re-engage the RN with the geo-political context of the contemporary world, as operational events are regularly doing, and the degree of overstretch is at once apparent. Further cuts in the active Fleet should simply not be entertained. Not only the numbers but also the age of the Fleet directs this judgement, because the building rate since 1997 has been unprecedented since well before the First World War. It has been *even lower* than it was during the Treaty restricted years 1921–36. (See Table) So the Fleet is ageing quickly. By the end of 2007 no operational frigates or destroyers will have been less than five years in commission and fourteen ships will have been operating for more than fifteen years.<sup>6</sup> Why do we emphasize the importance of destroyers and frigates? Because without these classes of ship and the capabilities which 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. Therefore not least in this connection, one specific issue must be flagged. The nature and the number of the class of Future Surface Combatant (FSC) will be pivotal. It will decide the direction of the RN for the next

generation. It will rebuild numbers from the present low point. In the absence of a new programme, in 2017 the RN may have as few as six T-45s and the next youngest frigate will be fifteen years old. Just as the current

The T-45s are not, by themselves, an answer to this new world. What should the FSC provide? Above all, a coherent operational, global footprint: in a word – numbers. It is also a sound principle that you should train where you may

COMMISSIONING RATES RN CRUISERS AND DESTROYERS 1918–1936  
COMMISSIONING RATES RN DESTROYERS AND FRIGATES 1980–2008

<i>Year</i>	<i>Cruisers</i>	<i>Destroyer Leaders &amp; Destroyers</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Destroyers &amp; Frigates</i>
			<b>1980</b>	2
			<b>1981</b>	2
			<b>1982</b>	3
			<b>1983</b>	1
			<b>1984</b>	2
			<b>1985</b>	3
			<b>1986</b>	1
			<b>1987</b>	1
			<b>1988</b>	3
			<b>1989</b>	2
<b>1918</b>	7	57	<b>1990</b>	2
<b>1919</b>	7	33	<b>1991</b>	2
<b>1920</b>	1	3	<b>1992</b>	1
<b>1921</b>	1	0	<b>1993</b>	2
<b>1922<sup>α</sup></b>	3	2	<b>1994</b>	3
<b>1923</b>	0	1	<b>1995</b>	1
<b>1924</b>	1	4	<b>1996</b>	1
<b>1925</b>	1	1	<b>1997</b>	2
<b>1926</b>	2	2	<b>1998</b>	0
<b>1927</b>	0	0	<b>1999</b>	0
<b>1928</b>	5	0	<b>2000</b>	1
<b>1929</b>	4	0	<b>2001</b>	1
<b>1930<sup>β</sup></b>	3	8	<b>2002</b>	1
<b>1931</b>	1	10	<b>2003</b>	0
<b>1932</b>	0	5	<b>2004</b>	0
<b>1933</b>	2	5	<b>2005</b>	0
<b>1934</b>	2	10	<b>2006</b>	0
<b>1935</b>	3	8	<b>2007</b>	0
<b>1936<sup>γ</sup></b>	2	17	<b>2008</b>	0

<sup>α</sup> Five Power Washington Naval Treaty – negotiated November 1921-February 1922

<sup>β</sup> London Naval Treaty – Five powers agree to extend capital ship moratorium to 1937: but the Axis powers start to cheat

<sup>γ</sup> 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

Navy is the product of Navy Board decisions twenty years ago, so today's build rate will determine the Fleet twenty years hence. It takes time to build ships. The record of the last decade speaks for itself.

have to fight; and for this the RN is already spread *much* too thin. The minimum FSC numbers we think the RN should have are thirty – a 10:20 mix: ten First Raters and twenty Second Raters. Those numbers are driven by

geostrategic givens (the interwar RN deployed sixty ships for blue water stations) and would restore a viable industrial drumbeat. In principle, the FSC should be capable of light surface action (interdiction), land attack, amphibious support, limited ASW, MCM, ELINT gathering and networked area detection and communications. So we shall need some creative naval architecture to accommodate all these, using the best potentials of modularity and ship design. Parkinson's Law will also have to be reversed.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the authors see good reasons – and fewer good reasons not – now formally to incorporate the Royal Fleet Auxiliary into the Fleet, and to upgrade both its defence and offensive capabilities in a Sea Base, and to reflect these in future RFA designs.

**b) Industrial Capacity.** Current shipbuilding plans are for managed decline after a short increase to construct the CVFs, with construction yard closures planned for the 2010s and a slowing (and therefore uneconomic) drumbeat tempo for the T-45s. Officials have no expectation of major new construction thereafter and – in answer to direct questioning at the RUSI Maritime Conference in November 2006 – not merely no capability for surge production, but not even any recognition that this might be a requirement that should be considered. This is simply madness. If the CVF programme were significantly delayed or cancelled, and FSC not brought forward, there is a real risk that warship building capacity would disappear from the UK and that design and systems engineering will migrate. The consequent dependence on other nations inevitably introduces significant sovereign risk which Britain has not run for centuries, if ever.

**c) The Base Infrastructure.** The apparent looming proposal to close a naval base also derives from the application of the 'five fallacies'. Given the Government's decision to continue a nuclear submarine missile force whose support facilities seem firmly based at Devonport, the choice *appears* to lie

between Rosyth and Portsmouth. Rosyth is only a dockyard; Portsmouth is both a dockyard and naval base. Portsmouth lies in the most active part of the UK economy and within the English education system: an important point for very many naval families. Rosyth, if kept at the expense of Portsmouth, would (with Faslane) place a large part of naval infrastructure in Scotland, whose future political relationship within the United Kingdom must be uncertain over coming years. By virtue of its role, Faslane is more explicitly at risk of closure in the event of a change of Scotland's status. Moreover, the current party political factors affecting

Rosyth will be, by the nature of these things, transient. But the key message is that a closure of bases is a decision to limit *any* future naval growth. In the more immediate term, it is as brutal a limiter upon surge ability. Recollect only the huge surge work output and the ingenuity of skilled craftsmen in the Dockyards during the Falklands and more recently the Gulf conflicts. The Navy Board would need to be remarkably confident about medium- to long-term global stability if they were to agree to the deletion of any existing facility other than Rosyth. Moreover, all this would have adverse effects on both public perceptions of the Navy and on internal morale.



In February 2007 the First Sea Lord, Admiral Jonathon Band, suggested that looming cuts threatened to turn the RN into the Belgian Navy. *Photo Crown Copyright*

A case is occasionally advanced to dispense with domestic dockyard and base facilities altogether and to rely on access to commercial facilities around the world. This case is strategically dangerous for self-evident reasons as well as being technically dubious. Are warships to compete for yard time with cruise liners? What assurance does the RN have about the loyalties of workers in such yards?

### At the Brink

This was an uncomfortable essay to write and perhaps it is also uncomfortable for some to read. But it is summoned because the RN is at a defining moment. It, like the Army, is being driven to defend its highest moral ground. The Navy has been and is now an indispensable bulwark of the national interest. There is no persuasive case that says that this will be any different in the medium-term to long-term future; and

today, the future of the RN, and of the Nation's security, is at stake. ■

#### NOTES

- 1 'First Sea Lord declares all-out war on Navy cuts,' *Daily Telegraph*, 17 February 2007, p.8.
- 2 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Book 1, Chapter 1, Part 28: in the edition edited and translated by Michael Howard & Peter Paret, Princeton, 1976, p.89.
- 3 This is how we read General Sir Rupert Smith's recent book *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Allan Lane, 2005). It is a serious contribution to this task. It is not a book about land warfare alone, as Sir Rupert vigorously has agreed in conversation with us about the need for a fresh start in telling the air/land/sea joint story, a need with which he is in full agreement.
- 4 The recent beaching of a random cargo ship off the East Devon coast, and the astonishing range of goods which spilled out of the MV Napoli onto Branscombe Beach, was a front-page object lesson for the public in its dependence on sea transport for most consumer goods.
- 5 Andrew S. Erickson & Andrew R. Wilson, 'China's aircraft carrier dilemma', *Naval War College Review* (Vol. 59, No. 4, 2006), pp. 13-45, esp pp. 21-2.
- 6 It is officially stated in rebuttal of such facts that twenty-eight ships have joined the Fleet since 1997. But this figure requires further scrutiny before it becomes meaningful. First we note that only eight ships have been ordered since 1997, but more significantly that only four of the twenty-eight were Destroyers or Frigates (DD/FF). This is the key number because to sustain a force of twenty-five DD/FF as announced in 2004 requires a minimum build rate of at least one ship per year. Current plans envisage only five more DD/FF entering service before 2017, assuming that eight Type 45s are eventually built. In that same ten year period after 1997 thirteen DD/FF were disposed of, a number of them considerably younger than the ships retained. (e.g., in 2005 HMS's Norfolk (fifteen years), Marlborough (fourteen); in 2006 HMS Grafton (ten).
- 7 He ascertained that between 1914 and 1928 there was a 68 per cent decrease in numbers of capital ships in commission; a 31 per cent decrease in officers and men and a 78 per cent increase in Admiralty bureaucrats.

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