

# Response to the [Call for evidence](#): “The Navy: purpose and procurement” (UK Parliament, Defence Committee)

## Response to “Part 1: What is the UK’s ambition for the Navy’s role over the next 20 years?”

### Executive summary

- In a changing geopolitical environment, the Royal Navy is at a crossroad.
- On the one hand, the carrier battlegroups, the inherent flexibility and versatility of naval platforms and the potential generated by the adoption of new technologies create opportunities for a ‘Global Britain’.
- On the other hand, resource constraints and a diversification of theatres of operations and threats create challenges impacting the ambition for the Navy’s role.
- The proposed way forward consists in 1) Embracing the maritime dimension of the UK, 2) Creating a hierarchy of theatres of operations, each with different objectives, 3) Implementing the concept of ‘collective seapower’ for the management of daily maritime security and ocean governance tasks, and 4) Leading the global management of the impacts of climate change on maritime trade and maritime security.

### Information on the respondent

I am a Senior Lecturer at Lancaster University, with over 15 years of experience as a researcher in naval power<sup>1</sup>. I have published two books and in excess of 25 peer-reviewed journal articles and academic book chapters on the topic. My research focuses on the maritime dimension of security, the new challenges facing navies and the evolution of seapower in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The following response to the ‘Call for evidence’ is based on my academic knowledge of the question, which complements the views of naval practitioners by offering a more conceptual take on the question. It is given in a personal capacity and reflects my personal opinion as an academic researcher.

### 1. Introduction

To answer the Part 1 questions, the current trends in the geopolitical, security and defence landscape must be put in relation with the key traits that characterise the Royal Navy. Indeed, the ambition for the Navy’s role is context-dependent only to some extent; the long-term features of British seapower are key drivers of the Royal Navy’s missions; along with context-dependent trends, they constrain decisions in regard to the future of the Navy.

### 2. Key traits

#### 2.1. *The challenge of a ‘balanced navy’*

A ‘balanced navy’ is a navy that can fulfil a variety of missions across the full spectrum of peace and war. It is widely recognised that there is a ‘trinity’ of naval missions (or functions) that a ‘balanced navy’ is supposed to fulfil: military/war fighting missions, diplomatic/defence engagement missions, and constabulary/maritime security missions<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Lancaster University page for [Dr Basil Germond](#).

<sup>2</sup> K. Booth (1979), *Navies and Foreign Policy*, Holmes & Meier Publishers, New York, pp.15-25; E. Grove (1990), *The Future of Sea Power*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD., p.234; MoD (2017), *Joint Doctrine Publication 0-10 UK Maritime Power*, DCDC, Shrivenham (accessed [online](#)). Nuclear deterrence holds a

The Royal Navy occupies one of the top spots of the global naval pecking order<sup>3</sup>. However, navies are resource intensive and decision-makers have to prioritise missions and/or platforms due to budgetary considerations. For example, the *Dreadnought* battleship programme in the early 1900s raised concerns as to its impacts on the capacity of the Navy to operate both at home and in peripheral theatres due to the concentration of power<sup>4</sup>; the decision in 1981 to assign the Royal Navy with a primary antisubmarine warfare role within NATO<sup>5</sup>, which left the Navy without a proper carrier battle group at the dawn of the Falklands War, raised criticisms<sup>6</sup>.

Today, commentators highlight the potential ‘frigate gap’ facing the Royal Navy in the short to medium-term future. The concern is not the lack of power projection capabilities (which has been addressed with the new aircraft carriers) but the lack of capabilities to fulfil the lower spectrum of missions assign to the Navy<sup>7</sup>. Budgetary constraints continue to put limitations on the prospect of a ‘balanced fleet’. The history of the Royal Navy suggests that this is not going to change radically just based on the recent declarations regarding future military spending. However, this is unlikely to prevent the navy from fulfilling its missions.

## 2.2. Agility

Navies are resource intensive and require long-term investments<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, ships remain in service for decades, and platforms are versatile and flexible. Vessels of a class above or below can fulfil similar missions/tasks, and ships operating in one theatre performing one type of task can easily be rerouted to another theatre to perform another task<sup>9</sup>. In other words, it would be reductive to claim that offshore patrol vessels, frigates, destroyers, and carrier battle groups have completely distinct functions. This is all the more true when accounting for the Navy’s traditional ability to endorse radical technological changes and innovate to overcome budgetary constraints. In addition, the Royal Navy is integrated within a network of link-minded navies, within NATO and beyond. The Navy is interoperable with allies and thus division of tasks is relatively easy as long as there is political incentive. In other words, versatility, flexibility, innovation and interoperability implies that the Royal Navy is *agile*, which puts it in a position to overcome the obstacles towards a ‘balanced fleet’.

## 2.3. Sea blindness

It has widely been acknowledged that the UK is a ‘maritime nation’, due to the country’s dependence on maritime trade as well as other contributions of the maritime sector to the UK economy<sup>10</sup>. It is also recognised that the UK “is an island nation with a strong maritime heritage and maritime interests throughout the world”<sup>11</sup>. The Royal Navy is a symbol of the Nation and has traditionally

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particular position within this ‘trinity’ since deterrence “is a Defence Task in its own right” (MoD, *ibid*, p.56).

<sup>3</sup> E. Grove (2014), “The Ranking of Smaller Navies Revisited”, in Michael Mulqueen, Deborah Sanders & Ian Speller (eds), *Small Navies*, Ashgate, Farnham, pp.6-11.

<sup>4</sup> J. T. Sumida (2006), “Geography, Technology, and British Naval Strategy in The Dreadnought Era”, *Naval War College Review*, Vol.59, No.3, pp.89-102.

<sup>5</sup> MoD (1981), *The United Kingdom Defence Programme: The Way Forward*, Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Defence by Command of Her Majesty, London, HMSO, cmnd.8288.

<sup>6</sup> E. Grove (2005), *The Royal Navy*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp.243-246.

<sup>7</sup> These concerns are hinted at in the Terms of reference of this very Call for evidence.

<sup>8</sup> Grove (1990), *op.cit.*, p.321.

<sup>9</sup> B. Germond (2008), “Multinational Military Cooperation and its Challenges: the Case of European Naval Operations in the Wider Mediterranean Area”, *International Relations*, Vol.22, No.2, pp.173-191; MoD (2017), *op.cit.*

<sup>10</sup> MoD (2017), *ibid*, p.20.

<sup>11</sup> HM Government (2014), *The UK National Strategy for Maritime Security*, Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Defence by Command of Her Majesty, May 2014, Cm 8829, Foreword, p.7 (accessed

benefitted from the support of the public opinion; in collective imaginaries, the Navy has been represented as a cornerstone of British power in the world<sup>12</sup>.

However, along with the comparative decline of British naval power, citizens and decision-makers have shown 'sea blindness', i.e. a lack of understanding of the importance of the maritime domain in general, and of the Navy in particular, for the country's security and prosperity<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, "the aspects of national identity which stimulate deep-seated and vocal support for the Navy have been eroded since the early years of the twentieth century"<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, the future role of the Royal Navy cannot be debated without also taking into account the symbol it still represents in Britain's collective identity and for Britain in the world.

### 3. New trends

#### 3.1. Global Britain

In the aftermath of Brexit, the government has made it clear that Britain will advance global interests and strengthen its global leadership<sup>15</sup>. This requires a global presence to engage with allies and face competitors on a global scale. Naval forces are vectors of seapower, both in terms of *intrinsic* power and forces projection and *extrinsic* power, i.e. prestige, presence, influence. The Royal Navy is thus likely to be increasingly solicited as an instrument of Britain's global power in the coming decades.

#### 3.2. Changing theatres of geopolitical contentions

Geopolitical realities have evolved since the end of the Cold War and 9/11. The UK's defence and security is linked to three regional theatres, each posing different challenges: a) the Euro-Atlantic theatre, which faces the resurgence of Russia as a geopolitical contender at a time when the European integration project shows signs of weakening, b) the Middle East theatre, which remains a highly unstable region, and c) the Indo-Pacific theatre, which is dominated by the rise and ambitions of China. In addition, the Arctic sub-theatre offers economic opportunities (e.g. new sea lanes of communication) and geopolitical challenges. The Navy has a role to play in each of these theatres.

#### 3.3. The cyber space

In addition to land, sea, air and space, the cyber space is recognised as a crucial new battleground. The Navy has its role to play in cyber operations, but cyber threats can also be directed against the Navy itself<sup>16</sup>. In addition, the Government's ambition to sustain "strategic advantage through science and technology"<sup>17</sup> will create opportunities for the Royal Navy. Indeed, navies have always benefitted from investments in new technologies due to the capital-intensive nature of naval forces. The digitalisation of defence has potential to ever increase the Navy's agility via innovation.

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[online](#)).

<sup>12</sup> See for example S. Baker (2010), *Written on the Water: British Romanticism and the Maritime Empire of Culture*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville and London; D. Leggett (2011), "Navy, nation and identity in the long nineteenth century", *Journal for Maritime Research*, Vol.13, No.2, pp.151-163.

<sup>13</sup> D. Mugridge (2009). Malaise or Farce - The International Failure of Maritime Security. *Defense & Security Analysis*, Vol.25, No.3, pp.305-311.

<sup>14</sup> D. Redford (2009), "Does the Royal Navy Matter? Aspects of National Identity and the Navy's Vulnerability to Future Budget Cuts", *RUSI Commentary*, 18 September 2009 (accessed [online](#)).

<sup>15</sup> HM Government (2021), *Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, Presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister by Command of Her Majesty, CP 403 (accessed [online](#)).

<sup>16</sup> C. Argles (2018), "A Conceptual Review of Cyber-Operations for the Royal Navy", *The Cyber Defense Review*, Vol.3, No.3, pp. 43-56.

<sup>17</sup> HM Government (2021), *op.cit.*, pp.35-42.

### 3.4. Maritime security

The importance of the sea for security goes much beyond defence considerations. Maritime security is about controlling the flow of goods and people at/from the sea and securing the maritime space against various threats and issues, from maritime crime, piracy and terrorism to people smuggling and illegal fishing to marine environment degradations<sup>18</sup>. The impacts of climate change on the occurrence of maritime criminality is a growing source of concern for the future<sup>19</sup>. The 2021 *Integrated Review* prioritises Britain's commitment as a global leader in tackling climate change<sup>20</sup>; it is thus likely that the maritime security dimension of the question will need to be prioritised.

## 4. Recommendations

### 4.1. To fully embrace the maritime dimension of the UK

To fulfil the ambitions set up in the 2021 *Integrated Review*, I suggest that the maritime dimension of the UK be fully embraced by all stakeholders, since it is key to the future of the country's prosperity, security and identity. It is crucial to recognise that the Royal Navy will play a central role to secure Global Britain, both as a military arm of Britain's ambitions and as a symbol and actor of its prestige and influence in the world.

### 4.2. To prioritise theatres of operations

Being ambitious is a good thing, but ambitions are ineluctably limited by the means at disposal, including naval means. Decision-makers have a choice to make about the hierarchy of theatres of operations for the Navy. It might not be possible to operate at the same level of intensity and in a sustainable way in both Europe and Asia. The objectives and naval missions in relation to each of these theatres should be proportionate to the core national interest.

### 4.3. To implement 'collective seapower'

Naval missions are often conducted in partnership with like-minded states, for example within NATO structures. The daily management of maritime security and ocean governance can also be shared amongst like-minded states. I propose to move beyond interoperability and naval cooperation, and to embrace 'collective seapower'<sup>21</sup>. Unlike intrinsic military power, seapower is not a zero-sum game; like-minded states do not only share naval tasks; they can share seapower, understood as the stability of the liberal, democratic world order at/from the sea. The Royal Navy can contribute to Britain's global leadership within this community of maritime states and stakeholders while limiting the resources to commit to the stability of the global maritime domain.

### 4.4. To take the lead in managing the impacts of climate change on maritime security

The realisation that climate change impacts on the occurrence of maritime criminality is still burgeoning. The UK can take the lead in the global management of this issue that has the potential to shape the future of the maritime security environment in the decades to come.

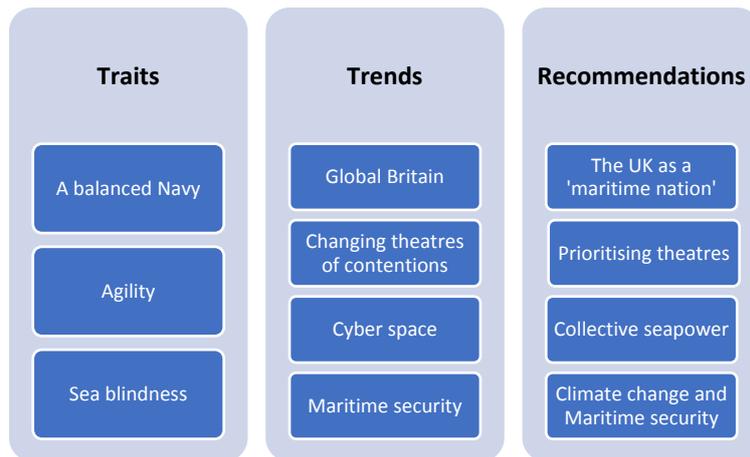
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<sup>18</sup> See HM Government (2014), *op.cit.*; MoD (2017), *op.cit.*, p.52.; B. Germond (2015), "The Geopolitical Dimension of Maritime Security", *Marine Policy*, Vol.54, pp.137-142.

<sup>19</sup> B. Germond & A. Mazaris (2019), "Climate Change and Maritime Security", *Marine Policy*, Vol.99, pp.262-266.

<sup>20</sup> HM Government (2021), *op.cit.*

<sup>21</sup> B. Germond (2019), "Seapower and Small Navies: A collective and Post-modern Outlook", in I. Speller et al. (eds), *Europe, Small Navies and Maritime Security*, Routledge, Abingdon, pp.26-35.



## 5. Conclusion

The Royal Navy is at a threshold. Investments in the carrier battlegroups have resulted in the Navy being as 'balanced' as possible. Further investments have been committed, and despite the concerns about the potentially problematic 'frigate gap', the Royal Navy is in good position to contribute to the 'Global Britain' project in the post-Brexit and post-pandemic era.

However, given resource constraints, choices still need to be made to make sure that the current ambitions can be sustained over several decades. This paper suggests that it is crucial to fully embrace the maritime dimension of the UK and to create a hierarchy of theatres of operations, each with different objectives. In addition, the management of daily maritime security and ocean governance tasks should be part of a 'collective seapower' strategy that will help limiting the resources that a single country needs to commit to the stability of the global maritime domain. Finally, the UK can lead the forthcoming fight against the impacts of climate change on maritime security.

## 6. Questions that the Committee should ask the Government

6.1. Which theatre(s) of naval operations (Euro-Atlantic, Arctic, Middle East, Indo-Pacific) will the Government prioritise? And why?

6.1.1. What will be the specific objectives/missions for the Navy associated with each of these theatres? And how do they relate to the UK's core national interest?

6.2. In the spirit of the 2021 *Integrated Review*, how does the Government conceive the role of the Navy beyond defence and security?

6.2.1. What is the role of the Navy as an instrument of British foreign policy and British global power?

6.2.2. Does the Government recognise the symbolic importance of the Navy as part of the 'Global Britain' project?