

Summary

This submission highlights the possible methodological shortcomings of the committee and its failure to appreciate the questions concerning the Royal Navy included in the Terms of Reference in an appropriate Fusion Doctrine and Integrated Operational Concept (IOPC) context. It also highlights the limitations regarding UK ability to effectively project power into the Indo-Pacific in the quest to deter, coerce, attract or influence. Finally, it highlights specific equipment shortcomings that will undermine the Carrier Strike Group concept operationally, particularly if deployed regularly in the Indo-Pacific.

Professor Greg Kennedy is the Professor of Strategic Foreign Policy in the Defence Studies Department of King's College London and the Director of the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies, King's College London, located at the Joint Services Command and Staff College at the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom.

'Over-extension in the short and long term - the pursuit of ends that are beyond the ways and means of the force - is self-defeating.' CNO, December 2018

1 What is the UK's ambition for the Navy's role over the next 20 years?

The UK's ambitions for the RN's role over the next 20 years appears to have many aspirations and possible missions. Some of these can be organised by geographic location, ranging from a strategic signalling role aimed at demonstrating a desire on the part of the UK to be a more engaged and forward-leaning presence in the Indo-Pacific region to providing high-end warfighting capability to NATO maritime operations in the European theatre. In between are arranged a number of roles such as anti-drugs operations, anti-piracy operations, Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief (HADR), Freedom of Navigation operations (FNO), to name just a few, largely in pursuit of supporting the international rule of law and a stable international system. Furthermore, there are the usual deployments required for a range of sovereignty and prestige signals in UK Overseas Territories, fishery protection and border security operations, although there is every reason to expect that some of these peacetime "security" requirements will become more demanding of naval involvement. The sum of these ambitions and needs indicates that the UK is a maritime power which expects its navy to perform operations globally and across the entire spectrum of established naval and maritime warfighting and security missions in the pursuit of a wide array of national security aims. Given the realities of a post-Brexit and post-COVID British economy, a rapidly changing international environment, and the current and near term (next 20 years) predicted state of the Royal Navy, the UK Government's ambitions and needs outstrip the actual funding, manpower and capabilities of the RN as it is presently, and will be, configured.

The most important ambition strategically for the UK, in terms of its use of the RN to defend the nation's national security interests, is the absolute requirement to work intimately and seamlessly with the United States and the United States Navy on a range of issues, from common procurement and interoperability and interchangeability matters, to more substantial

discussions regarding burden-sharing and areas of responsibility with regard to foreign policy and the links to maritime power so critical for the UK's prosperous and secure future. Sharing in technological development, ship design and construction, as well as consciously deciding what capabilities can or should not be developed, due to the other nation providing that capability, need to be expanded and formalized to a higher degree than has been the case in the past. Through such collaboration the UK will be able to guarantee, to any extent such guarantees can be made in these matters, the ability to expect to successfully utilize its current and future maritime power in pursuit of national security aims.

2 What naval threats is the UK likely to face and what standing commitments, including for NATO and UK Overseas Territories, does the government intend the Navy to undertake? In particular what is the implication of a tilt to the Indo-Pacific?

Because the UK will face the widest possible array of maritime threats, and have to operate in conditions of what is now termed “the contested peace” in a new international Great Power paradigm, where accountability, recognition and attribution of the true source of disruptive actions at sea can no longer easily be made, it is not simply a case of seeing naval power as just a NATO or military domain. The use of various forms of power with varying capabilities operate in the maritime domain, making it the most dynamic of all domains. Capabilities ranging from legal, economic, diplomatic, information, intelligence that are linked to the use of the sea is what the UK must conceptualize as its maritime domain. And it is across that range of domains that threats will arise from as well. It is, I would argue, the RN that must be configured and prepared, not only as part of a Fusion Doctrine concept strategically, or as an operational element within a Integrated Operational Concept (IOPC or Multi-Domain Integration as the Americans would say), but as both, to be the UK Government lead on ALL aspects of national security provision within the global maritime sphere. This is not to say they should own or procure all hardware or kinetic capabilities, but

they must be configured to understand, know, and direct appropriate national assets in the defence of the maritime sphere in both peace and war, as well as this new contested peace.

This complexity will mean a growth in non-naval elements of the RN that are able to link effectively with other government departments and ensure the totality of the UK's national security is focused on maritime power being the dominant element for the exercising of UK national security policy. It will mean a greater investment in intelligence, areas of expertise (why would the navy not be a natural lead from the five key military and national security domains [air, land, sea, space and cyber] in the setting up and running of a new version of the Economic Warfare or War Trade Departments, given the absolute importance of the linkage between maritime trade and commerce to any future prosperity Britain will realize), and skill sets that have nothing to do with hulls, bases or technology as is usually thought to be an RN area of modernisation or refurbishment. What does it mean for the RN to be fit to fight in the 21st century, is a question that needs greater analysis and exploration by not only this committee but higher levels of the national security apparatus as it grapples with understanding what fight, against whom, and for what, in this new age of peer on peer competition. Finally, the idea of IOPC has to start at the level of this committee: why are you thinking in terms of what the navy needs as opposed to what does the nation need to have as capabilities to maximize its maritime power, which is an absolute necessity for the national security of the UK?

The question of the impact of the Indo-Pacific is relatively simple: it is a distraction and costly prestige exercise that will have no significant impact, apart from a fleeting appreciation from the USN (and depending on how much the exercise of UK power projection to that region costs them in terms of enabling and support facilities, that American appreciation could be reminiscent of the British Pacific Fleet and USN at the end of World War Two, more a liability than a benefit). The cost of operating beyond the Straits of Hormuz are not

profitable in any sense: pounds, politics or prestige, in comparison to what is lost, or, indeed what greater threat or friction is created. The pursuit of American ties should not be at the expense of unnecessarily provoking, beyond carefully considered strategic lines, either Chinese or other regional displeasure due to a fleeting and uncertain naval presence. The use of legal means, political, economic or trade policies, along with other sources of strategic signalling and leverage, can all be used more effectively to both provide assurance and deterrence in the region. As well, potential and real allies are not impressed by a token presence in the area. Such pretentious and insubstantial contributions to the region run the risk of raising old anti-imperial and anti-colonial emotions that are still powerful in the region and which would resonate badly with an already unsettled UK domestic situation.

Therefore, the juice is not worth the strategic squeeze to spread already thin naval energy for little effect. Even if it is a cynical ploy to boost the chances of frigate or other naval platform sales, there is no evidence that such a presence as currently contemplated will produce that outcome. The Type 26 programme is an example of good practice because the UK managed to sell it and thus avoid building a class of just 6, without any large-scale RN excursions to the Indo-Pacific, proving more the point that good equipment will sell anywhere if it is seen as being truly worth purchasing. (Related to questions much lower down in the ToRs, why on earth, after all the evidence of the last 30 years, think T45 programme as an example, would the UK deliberately pursue a programme of ship building involving multiple classes of major warships (ie DD / FF etc) in numbers ranging from 1 to 5 / 8 when it is known by all parties concerned that it is the programme, not the number of hulls, that is the true cost driver.)

Best strategic value, as well as operational performance, is best achieved within the system that allows greatest flexibility and competency to take place: the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Gulf areas of operations. China is the more dangerous threat to the

existing international system and order. However, the need to check the Russian ability to exploit Western resources being drawn into an ever-growing range of presence and forward deployment missions in the Pacific, means that substantial maritime capabilities need to be left in home waters to deter that opportunism. Here the UK can acquire best overall strategic value: burden sharing areas of responsibility with the United States and other European partners. Such a use of maritime power demonstrates willingness to protect the international system, the rule of law, and to prepare for the ultimate level of competition, the use of lethal force (in many domains) in the pursuit of these national security aims. Operationally, it allows the sustainment, resilience, tempo and endurance characteristics, which will all be reduced greatly due to distance in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, the Euro-Atlantic-Gulf orientation allows UK IOPC/Fusion Doctrine to actually work, if it is properly invested in and created structurally. The lack of infra-structure, reliance on partners, and lack of logistic support in the Indo-Pacific requires far too much expectation of performance by not only other domains, but other domains from other nations, a recipe for disaster in the fashion of Crete and Singapore (to name just a few) where maritime-air integration in those cases failed to deliver the required synchronized operational effects. The forward basing/positioning at reach required has significant implications across the spectrum of enabling and other sustainment activity, as well as combat capability, as the RN well knows.

It is up to the political level to oversee that expenditure on vulnerable and critical support/enabling capabilities: organic air to air refuelling, at sea replenishment, to name just a few, are not left to tomorrow in pursuit of combat power today as it is clear that left to its own devices the RN will pursue the fighting elements now and hope the enabling elements can be “found” in the future. This condition is clearly demonstrated with the CSG cruise currently, where not only USMC F-35B are required to make a viable and credible air wing, but a myriad of other theatre enablers are to be provided by the United States and other allies.

Some would argue it is a show of strength and unity. Others might see it as weakness and over-reach. The reliance on the United States to provide such critical support in times of need should be suppressed in all acquisition thinking regarding critical enablers. IF the time comes to test these capabilities for real, the United States will have a tough enough time looking after its own problems in support of its forces, let alone be overly keen to share with even close allies. History has shown this to be the case when peace turns to war and it would be completely irresponsible for any UK Government to expect the RN to perform in certain theatres and scenarios effectively without this basic level of organic support and sustainment capability. The risks associated with a failure to address these logistical/enabling elements in the quest for more “teeth” at the expense of the “tail”, are decreased by the geography of the Euro-Atlantic-Gulf allowing better IOPC to be possible, as well as a reduction of the tyranny of distance on operational tempo and sustainment characteristics.

Again, it must be emphasised here that if Fusion Doctrine and IOPC are to become real strategic and operational ways of thinking in the UK, then that process must start now at the level of this committee. The lack of any such thinking being included in the ToRs of this committee, when related to questions such as the ones addressed in this submission so far, or indeed the majority not addressed here but are related to purely mechanical/hardware issues, are troubling signs of a lack of understanding at the political level of what and how these two concepts are to function going forward in preparing the nation’s national security thinking and apparatus. This stove-piped way of thinking about planning and procuring capability for the future cannot deliver effective answers to the present, and tomorrow’s, strategic and operational needs

3 Concerns have been raised over some core equipment and enabling capabilities for the carrier strike program. The withdrawal and removal of partners from the F-35 program has led to speculation that the UK will cut its order.

There are numerous missing components which prevent the UK from providing a sovereign and self-reliant, and therefore resilient, to say nothing of operationally credible, CSG. The issue of the lack of solid support vessels is clear for anyone understanding the link between reach, presence, tempo, sustainment, resilience and manoeuvre. Unless that is resolved the CSG cannot be considered a credible warfighting capability. Even then, with limited logistics support and the increased appetite for fuel, armaments, spares, etc that would accompany high intensity warfighting, the CSG can only be considered a low intensity/low threat capability. It would not survive in the narrow and confined waters of the Baltic, Black Sea or Gulf of Hormuz areas, and would have to stay well beyond its effective operational range in any Pacific theatre such as the South China Sea or seas around Taiwan. Therefore, the concept of power projection, when applied to the CSG at this point, must be carefully defined and contextualized.

Added to the supply limitations that exist, and the questionable logic of expecting allies to overcome these critical support deficits in times of high crisis and operational need globally, there is the question of an adequate air wing. Forty-eight airframes is the minimum peacetime compliment to give limited credibility in limited theatres and conditions to the utility of the CSG. High intensity operations would reduce that number and effectiveness rapidly. If any new airframe programme forecast for the UK, such as the TEMPSET, are not able to have a VSTOL version that could act as an emergency replacement for the depletion of the F-35B fleet due to operational tempo, then the solutions can only be a larger F-35B purchase now, or, development of a cheap, unmanned VSTOL UCAV. Cheaper would mean less capable in areas of stealth and 6th generation airframe capabilities, but at least, if the ship itself survived, the ability to

operate something from a very specific and unique flight deck would be possible. Expecting spares, extras or borrowed aircraft from US Marines is possible, and should be politically confirmed (see USN support to make British Pacific Fleet fit for purpose in World War Two) but assuming that such replacements would take place is not sound planning. As well, attrition rates are probably not realistic. Think PPE experience representing a real-world example of how the pace and intensity of operations will degrade any existing kinetic capabilities through usage far exceeding any predicted levels.

The final point is regarding an organic air-to-air re-fuelling system for the F-35B from the carriers themselves. Reliance on shore-based facilities to provide this enabling activity can be done. However, that reliance carries a much heavier and restricting amount of risk in the higher threat environments, particularly in the vastness of the Indo-Pacific region with its accompanying more capable threat environment that will challenge such shore-based re-fuelling to mesh seamlessly with the maritime component. The UK carrier design makes the inclusion of such an organic capability problematic, but not impossible. It does, however mean that existing modern technologies such as the USN MQ-25 Stingray UCAV re-fuelling system are not an option. The inability to find an air-to-air refuelling system that is organic to the UK carriers means: A. having to rely on other nations to provide this in a mixed non-shore/shore based manner, B. rely solely on shore-based assets for this enabler, C. require a dedicated ship, a hybrid carrier/oiler that would have to accompany the CSG. The need to rely on shore-based assets for this function again encourages an Atlantic-Mediterranean-Gulf perspective as far as fuller operational effectiveness is concerned, as those assets are both plentiful, require less distance to be factored in to the synchronisation with the maritime elements, have bastions or safe pockets to work from with less fear of threat, and are to a larger extent controlled by the UK themselves. The NATO relationship here means a greater degree of resilience and

redundancy can be expected and thus a greater expectation of carrier operations being able to count on effective shore-based support.