

**Written Evidence Submission from Dr David Blagden (University of Exeter) for an
Inquiry of the UK House of Commons' Defence Select Committee on
'The Navy: Purpose and Procurement'**

I am writing to provide evidence for your inquiry on 'The Navy: Purpose and Procurement'. This submission is based – with some additional explanation – on my recent remarks to the First Sea Lord's 2021 Royal Navy Sea Power Conference (19/05/2021), convened by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Those remarks – which reflect my academic research on international security and national strategy¹ – are available online.² This submission is not structured explicitly around the questions posed in your Call for Evidence, but touches upon several of them. Please also be aware that my recent oral evidence before your Committee addressed various questions of naval policy in the context of scrutinising HM Government's 2021 Integrated Security, Defence, Development, and Foreign Policy Review, so you will find additional elaboration of my views in there.³

The Strategic Context

The emerging strategic context that UK naval policy will have to face is defined by the waning of US unipolarity and the return of functional multipolarity. No other state is likely to be a true military peer of the United States any time soon – especially at sea, where America's concentration of naval power remains historically unprecedented. However, China already has a larger economy vis-à-vis its US counterpart than the USSR ever did, is already the world's largest economy on a purchasing power parity (PPP) basis, is acquiring a suite of capabilities tailored for contesting US control of the Western Pacific, and also has means to extend various forms of coercive influence further afield. Meanwhile, Russia is unlikely to be a US/Chinese peer ever again, and – on an exchange rate basis – has an economy not even among the largest three in Europe (Germany, France, UK). However, on a PPP basis, its economy is similar in size to Germany's, it has large and relatively advanced military forces reflecting readiness to undergo domestic privations in the service of foreign policy, it has various strategic ways of maximising its influence abroad, and it has demonstrably high resolve to oppose NATO preferences in its region (the region that we also inhabit). As such, while neither the United States nor its European/Asian allies may be in 'absolute' decline – Western development levels continue to rise – and while neither China nor Russia is yet close to being America's military equal around the world as a whole, a *relative* power shift is nevertheless underway that is restoring functional multipolarity in key regions. Interstate competition follows in such a world not because others are 'bad' or 'greedy' – although they may be – but rather as all powers seek to protect and advance their interests in a system in which no-one else will do it for them.

¹ I am Senior Lecturer in International Security at the University of Exeter's Strategy and Security Institute; a full biography and publications list is available here: <https://www.exeter.ac.uk/strategy/people/blagden/>. I have also served as an officer in the Royal Naval Reserve, but stress that this evidence is based on my civilian academic expertise; it has not received input from – and does not reflect the official views of – the Royal Navy or Ministry of Defence.

² As part of Plenary 1 here (<https://www.iiss.org/events/2021/05/first-sea-lord-sea-power-conference-2021>); direct access is also available here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2I3wkHUtH4>, from 00:37:59).

³ Oral Evidence: 'Defending Global Britain in a Competitive Age', HC 265, 25 May 2021, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/2251/pdf/>.

This erosion of US dominance will have major implications, in turn, for the UK. Many features of post-Cold War international politics – Western scope for humanitarian intervention and armed norm-enforcement, emphases on counterterrorism and counterinsurgency as the main focus of security policy, increasing institutionalisation and juridification of international interactions, etc – have in fact been consequences of the US ‘unipolar moment’. As such, with that ‘moment’ now waning, these presumed certainties that have dominated UK foreign and defence policy over the past three decades are now in flux. Most fundamentally for the UK, a post-unipolar system will be one in which the United States is increasingly unwilling – and eventually unable – to shoulder all of its allies’ security burdens simultaneously. Specifically, if Washington is preoccupied with balancing its most potent peer-competitor since the United States’ own emergence as a great power in East Asia, the major European powers must expect to do more to secure themselves and their home region, for a transatlantic superpower may not be available to do it for them.

Implications for UK Maritime Strategy

The strategic context outlined above carries some big implications for UK maritime strategy. Three are particularly worth highlighting for an inquiry into the Royal Navy’s purpose and associated procurement needs.

Striving for Sea Control

First, Western ‘command of the commons’ can no longer be presumed. Key research on the basis of US hegemony from the height of the American unipolar moment around two decades ago identified that – while the United States might not be able to conquer all other major powers – it could nevertheless exercise dominance of the global ‘commons’ (sea, air, space).⁴ UK naval posture – as *primus inter pares* of US allies – evolved to reflect that situation, with the sorts of forces needed to contest control of the sea (or at least deny it to others if such control could not be won) drawn down while maritime power-projection expanded. Today, by contrast, we once again face a situation in which the sea (and air above the sea) cannot simply be presumed a benign highway for Western foreign policy; before we can contemplate power-projection *via* the sea, the UK may need to compete *for* the sea – and not assuredly with overwhelming American help. We might even need to prevent the sea – and air above the sea – from being used as a highway for power-projection against our own territory/interests (or against those of allies whose defence we assess as sufficiently important to our own security/prosperity).

Such an assessment has significant implications for UK naval force posture. Overall fleet balance, weapons fit, and more besides, all presently reflect the comfortable habits of three decades of essentially uncontested sea control, including the presumption that benign ‘presence’ tasks and high-end ‘warfighting’ tasks can be neatly demarcated to areas of our own choosing. Put differently, while we have recently started to take note of others’ rising

⁴ Barry R. Posen, ‘Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony’, *International Security* 28:1 (2003), 5-46.

‘anti-access/area-denial’ (A2/AD) capabilities, we may have allowed our *own* A2/AD to atrophy – from widespread fitting ‘for but not with’ even among our most advanced (and scarce) surface combatants to the absence of an advanced surface-/air-launched anti-ship and land-strike missile from RN/RAF service.⁵ The US Navy’s concept of ‘Distributed Lethality’⁶ – the notion that every platform, even if detached from its intended specialist role in task-group operations, must still be sufficiently capable to complicate an adversary’s operations – therefore merits UK investigation.⁷ Such a finding also carries relevance for ‘greyzone’ activity, which has recently dominated much UK strategic thinking: ‘sub-threshold’ activities may indeed be damaging, but adversaries are more likely to choose to remain below the threshold of kinetic warfare and to feel constrained in what they can do *within* the ‘greyzone’ – both preferable outcomes – if they face a more potent conventional deterrent to escalation.

Realism over the ‘RBLO’

Second, we must recognise that the ‘rules-based liberal order’ (RBLO) – which much recent UK maritime debate has focused on upholding – was largely an artefact of US primacy. As Patrick Porter has recently demonstrated, the US-dominated order has neither been ‘rules-based’ – great powers frame their preferences as rules with which everyone should comply, yet break such ‘rules’ when their own interests necessitate it, as the UK and our allies all do – nor ‘liberal’ (ordering the world is necessarily rough, coercive, illiberal work).⁸ A more realistic view would acknowledge that what we characterise as the ‘RBLO’ is essentially the US-led West’s foreign-policy preferences,⁹ forged and enforced when other powers were not in a position to enforce their own alternative preferences, but that other actors with such alternative preferences now have the power to contest our preferences in a post-unipolar world. The harder strategic choice for us in such a world of contestation is to rank our preferences by (a) importance and (b) our ability to positively affect them.

In naval terms, this does not mean that the UK should suddenly stop acting lawfully. But it *does* mean that we should recognise that all states contest and resist ‘rules’ that are not in their interests, and that we should only pay a certain level of cost to defend a principle. The concrete implication in terms of this inquiry is that interpreting the purpose of the Royal Navy as ‘upholding RBLO’ is both costly and perilous. Rather, the primary purpose of the Royal Navy is to prevent seaborne attack on the British people, to secure our survival- and prosperity-essential sea lines of communication, and to extend maritime control/security over our wider region to prevent the former two concerns from manifesting themselves. Mistaking contested preferences for incontestable absolutes risks leading scarce, valuable, and yet (in

⁵ For recent discussion, see (from a former RN officer): Tom Sharpe, ‘Under-gunned Royal Navy Warships?’ *Navy Lookout*, 22 May 2021, <https://www.navylookout.com/under-gunned-royal-navy-warships/>.

⁶ See, for an introduction: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2015/january/distributed-lethality>.

⁷ In addition to the USN, France’s Marine Nationale has also reportedly been undertaking recent studies in this area, e.g. on the possibility of expanding fleet anti-submarine coverage by attaching containerised variable-depth sonar systems to offshore support vessels: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/08/french-navy-starts-trials-of-variable-depth-sonar-aboard-loire-class-offshore-support-vessel/>.

⁸ Patrick Porter, *The False Promise of Liberal Order: Nostalgia, Delusion, and the Rise of Trump* (Polity Press, 2000).

⁹ This does not make them less worthy, of course – our preferences may indeed have sound ethical bases – but it does bely that they are not timeless, universal, incontestable truths removed from political contestation.

certain ways) vulnerable UK naval forces into avoidable confrontations far from our home region against superior powers over interests that are peripheral for us (because of distance) yet perceivedly vital for them (because of proximity).¹⁰ The potential results could include severe casualties/losses and associated suffering for British citizens, weakened UK forces no longer capable of essential missions closer to home, dangerous escalation to even-worse conflict with nuclear-armed adversaries, and diminished credibility (if we profess something a vital interest, compete over it, but fail anyway).

Cautious Choice of Credible Commitments

Finally, the international system described above necessitates cold realism about what the UK can and cannot do in terms of naval commitments. Symbolic posturing and tokenistic ‘role’ performance went largely unpunished during the unipolar era. As noted above, at the height of US dominance, the sea was essentially a benign highway for our foreign policy, which was something we did at range, to others. Competitive multipolarity, by contrast, demands credibility in what we choose to do, or to not do it at all.

Credibility is a function of power and resolve, i.e. how much capacity we have to bring about a favoured outcome and whether we care enough to bear the costs that go with bringing about a favoured outcome.¹¹ So, to achieve naval credibility – be it deterrent, coercive, or compellent – in an age of competitive multipolarity, we need more capability than was adequate during the unipolar era (both number of platforms and the capability of individual platform). But we *also* need to be selective in choosing where to commit forces – and when doing so, to commit in sufficient concentration to actually fulfil the affected interests – versus where/when to not commit at all.

Accordingly, UK commitments ‘East of Suez’¹² – notably the Persian/Arabian Gulf and the Western Pacific – merit particularly hard scrutiny. Deploying a patrol vessel to Singapore with a mandate to show some regional presence and build situational awareness while avoiding contested situations – for example – may be a relatively low-risk and low-cost commitment (although it will also be of correspondingly limited consequence). But more sizeable deployments of more capable forces in these regions – especially when they insert themselves into contested local politics – come with significant drawbacks. They carry substantial opportunity-costs (e.g. if some/most of the RN’s deployable anti-submarine and air-defence escorts are in the Western Pacific, they are not simultaneously available for routine tasks and/or emergent contingencies in our Euro-Atlantic home region). They bring

¹⁰ On the salience of distance for both diminishing the immediacy of potential threats but also reducing capability to counter a given threat (the so-called ‘loss of strength’ gradient), see discussion in: David Blagden, ‘When does Competition become Conflict? Technology, Geography, and the Offense-Defense Balance’, *Journal of Global Security Studies* (online 2021, forthcoming in print: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogab007>).

¹¹ Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Cornell University Press, 2007).

¹² This is an anachronistic term with imperial connotations, of course, but – in its positional relationality vis-à-vis the UK, i.e. demarcating our Euro-Atlantic home maritime region from more distant regions containing less proximate interests – it has a certain utility. ‘Indo-Pacific’ – a more zeitgeist current label – has utility of other kinds, but can also be unhelpfully expansive (the ‘Indo-Pacific’ stretches from the shores of Egypt and South Africa to those of Alaska and Chile) while grouping together many disparate polities/concerns.

significant entanglement/escalation risks over interests that are peripheral for us but perceivedly vital to the local protagonists (e.g. if an RN warship is asserting navigational freedom in the South China Sea, they risk becoming embroiled in dynamics that are primed for conflict anyway,¹³ or indeed being the catalyst – perhaps even the non-US but US-aligned proxy target – for such escalation). They risk ‘penny packeting’ – the fear of 1960s UK strategists contemplating whether to reduce the ‘East of Suez’ presence – that is, dispersing ineffectively small forces around the world that are big enough to get into trouble but not big enough to meaningfully affect the local balance of power (i.e. to reduce the trouble they find themselves in). And ultimately, they even risk antagonising important allies (e.g. if the Euro-NATO states still need substantial American help to secure their home region, reducing Washington’s scope to ‘pivot’ to Asia, while simultaneously sending inconsequential forces to the Asia-Pacific that then require US protection while in-theatre, or indeed, if UK forces’ bluff is called but – lacking the power/resolve of the local protagonists, and thereby lacking credibility – they ultimately fail and/or flee).

None of this is to say that the RN and other associated UK forces should never deploy outside the Atlantic/Mediterranean, of course. But it does suggest – in conjunction with the preceding two points about a current paucity of sea-control capabilities and recognition that upholding ‘rules’ far from home is not the primary purpose of the RN – that we should be cautiously selective about the naval commitments chosen. Put simply, securing/controlling the Euro-Atlantic area – particularly the Northeast Atlantic, but also the Mediterranean and South Atlantic – are first-order, non-discretionary, survival- and prosperity-essential tasks for the UK. By contrast, policing the Gulf and ‘upholding the RBLO’ in the Western Pacific are second-order ‘nice to have’ tasks that come with non-trivial price-tags.¹⁴

Conclusion

This evidence submission has summarised the emerging strategic context faced by UK naval planners and suggested three corollary implications for UK maritime strategy/posture. In the process, it has made associated claims for both the purpose and procurement priorities of the Royal Navy. I would of course be happy to expand on any of the analysis provided here; many thanks for your time and consideration.

¹³ Avery Goldstein, ‘First Things First: The Pressing Danger of Crisis Instability in U.S.-China Relations’, *International Security* 37:4 (2013), 49-89.

¹⁴ To be clear, the Persian/Arabian Gulf and Western Pacific are not alike in terms of strategic salience. The latter is the crucible of twenty-first-century great-power politics, and therefore crucially important, but best handled by the United States and its capable regional allies (Japan, South Korea, Australia, etc) while European NATO states focus on securing Europe (lightening Washington’s non-Asian burdens in the process). The former, by contrast, is of declining strategic salience and Western states could advantageously draw down their commitments there: David Blagden and Patrick Porter, ‘Desert Shield of the Republic? A Realist Case for Abandoning the Middle East’, *Security Studies* 30:1 (2021), 5-48.