

Written evidence from Dr. Howard Fuller

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Defence Select Committee – The Navy: purpose and procurement

As a research-active UK academic and published naval historian I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the Defence Select Committee's inquiry on 'The Navy: purpose and procurement'. Since 2005 I have been a core representative of the University of Wolverhampton's resident History and Governance Research Institute (HAGRI)'s Conflict Studies Research Group, followed by the [Centre for Historical Research](#). We can indeed offer professional assessment of some of the current issues in play, being a research-driven, evidence-based academic think tank which also supports the longest-running undergraduate degree-programme in [War Studies](#) (since 1979), a MA in Britain and the First World War which featured prominently as part of the 2014-18 Commemoration, and recently a MOD-contracted [Air, Space and Cyber Power Studies MA-degree](#), primarily for members of the defence sector. Key publications in the past few years by award-winning staff are noted in Appendix 1.

My own background in War Studies stems from my undergraduate degree in [military history from the Ohio State University](#), with a MA and PhD in War Studies from King's College London. My doctoral dissertation assessed the comparative strategic and tactical strengths of British and Union ironclad programmes during the American Civil War era (1861-1865), with special emphasis upon rival foreign and naval policy decision-making. During this time I was the [Rear Admiral John D. Hayes Fellow](#) in U.S. Naval History through the U.S. Naval Historical Center (now Naval History and Heritage Command) in Washington, D.C., and a West Point (U.S. Military Academy) Fellow in [Military History](#). Since then I have been a [Caird Research Fellow](#) (Royal Museums Greenwich) specialising in the 19th-20th century Royal Navy, with further grants from the Institute of Historical Research, for example, and Associate Editor of the [International Journal of Naval History](#).

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1. The role of the Defence Select Committee is to 'examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Ministry of Defence and its associated public bodies', and the two main questions which are now posed ('What is the UK's ambition for the Navy's role over the next 20 years?' and 'Are naval procurement and support plans delivering the capabilities required for this role?') are indeed complex inasmuch as they intertwine political and naval policies as well as geostrategic and technological factors.
 2. Importantly, the naval threats the UK is likely to face are far from the UK: in the Baltic (as suggested by the 2019 summer joint, multinational exercise 'Baltic Protector'), Arctic, Black Sea and Indo-Pacific. Most British trade is Indo-Pacific based, so Britain is more vulnerable in that respect. But a trading relationship is one of peace, not provocation. Trade is also multi-faceted, so that regional powers like India and global powers like the US will prioritise defensive naval commitments here.
 3. The US Navy has meanwhile enjoyed relatively large, sustained development of shipbuilding infrastructure and fleet support. That is unlikely to change anytime soon. The UK, on the other hand, has not enjoyed that kind of power since 1945, and even by 1918 was showing signs of socio-economic stress. What the Royal Navy can do is show the flag with a small roving flotilla of smart (that is state-of-

the-art) ships like the Type-31 frigates, and perhaps *Astute*-class submarines comparable to the 'SSN (X)' attack-class [being considered for the US Navy](#).

4. Similarly, an inability to supply the desired carrier planes, radar and support ships will necessarily limit the deployment opportunities of the Royal Navy's two new aircraft carriers, *Queen Elizabeth* and *Prince of Wales*. Recall here that it was partially because of the rushed forward deployment of the previous *Prince of Wales* (a *King George V*-class battleship, laid down in 1937 and completed in 1941) to the Pacific—without adequate anti-aircraft defences on board, carrier support or functioning radar—that [doomed this potent prestige symbol](#) when attacked by Japanese land-based aircraft specially fitted to kill warships.¹

On the other hand, as the independent [Navy Lookout opines](#), *'The carriers are critical hard and soft power assets that will help shape international perceptions about UK. Throwing them away would send all the wrong messages about Britain's desire for international engagement.'* But as with the ill-fated 'Force Z' in December 1941, squandering these assets could also backfire disastrously.

NOTE: the 'Agile Stance' series of exercises will comprehensively chart the UK's strategic mobilisation capabilities, starting with Agile Launch in the autumn of 2021, and culminating in Agile Defender in 2024.

5. The UK should prioritise the *Dreadnought* program, even if at the expense of the *Astute*-class upgrades to the *Trafalgar*-class nuclear-powered fleet submarines (SSNs). The strategic deterrent represented by SSBNs is the core national defence. SSNs are good for ship-killing and launching cruise missiles for land-strikes, and consequently while more valuable for overall sea control and power-projection (and perhaps more effective than surface warships because of their stealth), they are also relatively more expensive.
6. Here too, the cooling problems on the Type-45 destroyers associated with the WR021 gas turbines, for example, seem to undermine the government's most recently published goals (*Global Britain in a Competitive Age* - CP 403) for 'persistent' long-term deployments east of Suez, and whose emphasis is more upon rapid development of the next generation of frigates.

NOTE: The Global Combat Ship (Type 26 frigate) is a well thought out concept, similar to the US-projected *Constellation*-class guided-missile frigate (itself a more ambitious development of the *Independence*-class Littoral Combat Ship, drawing 14-feet).

7. As Peter Roberts, Director of Military Sciences at RUSI, [has observed](#), when the Chief of the Defence Staff (General Sir Nicholas Carter) [addressed the Institute on 5 December 2019](#), he was *'less likely to have been thinking about what the armed forces operate with (the platforms), but instead about how they might have to do it, against (and with) whom they will be engaged and where the next fight will take place.'*

Indeed, Carter argued that *'Modernising will only get us so far – what is needed is a step-change in how we fight; in how we run the business; in how we develop our talent; in how we acquire our equipment; and in how we provide support – this requires transformation. As we enter the fourth Industrial*

Revolution, it is the same challenge and opportunity that faced our predecessors as they went from sail to steam.'

8. Yet while the Victorian Royal Navy was able to effectively transition from sail to steam, and the Admiralty was in many respects pioneering—not just in designing new types of warships and implementing new technologies from power plants to armour to heavy rifled ordnance but also in making the most of British civilian industries and innovations—the rest of the world did as well. The US devised monitors, the Russians laid down minefields—such 'Anti-Access Area-Denial' (A2/AD) proved equally successful in counter-detering British foreign policy ambitions in multiple arenas.²

While these did not threaten Britain directly, they forced British decision-makers to question imperial commitments and the aggressive pursuit of state 'interests' worldwide. Palmerstonian interventionism gave way to non-intervention—and then 'splendid isolation'.

And while this was more often regarded as an unsatisfactory compromise of British national prestige and international rank and influence, Britain was nevertheless able to steer clear of major conflicts. It underwrote, in fact, the 'Pax'. *'This harassed age is inclined to look back on the 19th century with nostalgia,'* Captain Stephen Wentworth Roskill cautioned his readers during the height of the Cold War, *'regarding it as a period when any threat to peace was promptly and effectively dealt with by the omnipresent Royal Navy; but such a conception is a travesty of history.'*³

9. Thus, as Parliamentary [Briefing Paper Number 7313](#) (26 February 2020) has made clear, a recurring issue for UK Defence Reviews since the end of the Second World War (at least) has also been financial.

Secretary of State for Defence Ben Wallace [has warned](#) that no such reviews *'going back to the early '90s, has been properly funded to back up the ambitions...That requires honesty from the Department, wider Government, and the Treasury, and for the ambitions for what we want our country to do and be around the world. If we match our appetites with stomachs, it will have a long-lasting legacy.'*

10. More naval power—to match enlarged policy mandates—costs more money, and that ultimately comes from everyday British people. Increased taxes in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic at least (to pursue Global Britain ideals at the expense of China), will not be very popular at home. Scotland would likely see it as a further abuse on the part of Westminster...
11. Starting with the Sandys Review of 1957 (post-Suez, 1956), it was observed that *'Britain's influence in the world depends first and foremost on the health of her internal economy and the success of her export trade. Without these, military power cannot in the long run be supported'* (Paper 7313, 7).

The *Defence White Paper* of 2003-4 essentially repackaged a generational process of UK cutbacks in military and naval spending, reflecting the nation's role in the Cold War-era as a member of the NATO alliance, the need for rapid expeditionary capabilities in the 1990s, and counter-terrorism initiatives post-9/11.

12. Post-Brexit, the pursuit of a 'Global Britain' agenda as outlined in the preliminary *Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* ([Briefing Paper 8987](#), 21 August 2020), will need to cover 'all aspects of international policy from defence to diplomacy and development'.
13. [Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab has since declared](#) that the 'UK has a central role to play on the world stage as an independent sovereign state, a leading member of the western alliance, and an energetic and dependable partner in the growing prosperity of the Indo-Pacific region.' The UK's mission in the East is to therefore be 'a force for good in the world. Force – because let's not be naïve about it, without power, economic, military, diplomatic, cultural clout, we can't do anything.'
14. This is in direct connection with the extensive March 2021 government report on [Global Britain in a Competitive Age \(CP 403\)](#), where the identified threat to UK interests is epitomised by growing threats to the *status quo* world order; with democracies now gradually being outpaced economically by authoritarian regimes—namely China.
15. Secretary of State for International Trade Elizabeth Truss [declared](#) that:

'Global Britain will be a beacon for free enterprise, free trade and free people across the world, and we will light that beacon championing the values for which the UK has long been known. From our abolition of the corn laws in 1846 to helping to found the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1948, the UK has long been a global leader in shaping the rules-based system'. Brexit is likewise seen as an 'opportunity for this country to turn the tide [against protectionist measures around the world], and to be a global champion of free, rules-based trade with the World Trade Organisation at its heart.'

16. But prying open protected industries, markets and perhaps inevitably, cultures, is what also led to the first 'Opium War' between Britain and China from 1839 - 1842 (when Hong Kong was forcefully ceded to British control, and relinquished only in 1997). In the meantime, Peel's crucial support of the Corn Laws against his own Tory-Conservative Party led to the swift downfall of his government.



NEW ELGIN MARBLES.

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The Second Opium War of 1856 - 1860, championed by Whig Prime Minister Palmerston, culminated in the Anglo-French sacking of Beijing and the burning of the Summer Palace; a deliberate act of cultural annihilation not uncommon in the annals of Western powers.

17. Indeed, as naval historian Andrew Lambert has pointed out, the traditional Tory-Conservative 'world view' of British sea power was to maintain a respectable strategic deterrent (steam-powered ships-of-the-line

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forming a central battlefleet as opposed to SSBNs) but to eschew the Whig and later Liberal predilection for projecting power, foreign interventionism and even Palmerstonian ‘gunboat diplomacy’.⁴

18. For as much as Global Britain strives for a greater future of commercial expansion—confidently underwritten by the Royal Navy—it has to be very careful not to repeat the mistakes of the past.
19. In contrast with the West, the name of the naval game for China and Russia has not been ‘Carrier Enabled Power Projection (CEPP)’ of their own but rather thwarting a classic strategic offense with classic strategic defence in the form of A2/AD capabilities; in the Black Sea, Baltic and South China Sea—especially since the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995-6—for example.

It is easier to sink big ships than build them, even if big ships die harder than smaller ones.

20. China now has two medium-sized aircraft carriers (*Shandong* and the *Lianoning*—the former Soviet carrier *Riga*), but they will be in shakedown for some time, building their operational art from scratch. A pair of large, nuclear-powered carriers might be ready by 2030. By contrast, the US Navy floats 19 aircraft carriers, 10 of which are nuclear-powered giants of the *Nimitz*-class, to be replaced by the 10 new, nuclear-powered *Gerald R. Ford*-class under construction.
21. A more practical application of Littoral Strike Ship might be the [Prevail Partners multi-role vessels](#) (MRVs). [Since the late 1980s](#), the US Navy has also explored the concept of the ‘Arsenal Ship’ for surface warfare; packed with cruise missile-ordnance (in vertical launch cells) at the expense of other qualities and intended to dominate a contested zone of control.⁵
22. These types of platforms might be more cost-effective because they are more specialized, but as adjuncts to the fleet they have (like ‘floating batteries’ and monitors) historically been the last to secure funding in times of peace, the most-needed in times of war, and the first men-of-war to be scrapped when the fighting was over.
23. This at a time, as [a recent RUSI article suggests](#), when the 2019 US Department of Defense’s Missile Defense Review ‘*explicitly identifies the theatre-level anti-access arsenals of peer competitors such as Russia and China as a threat to be defeated as opposed to deterred and commits to the defence of the US homeland against cruise-missile as well as ballistic-missile strikes.*’
24. The ability to successfully penetrate and destroy hardened defence zones in the South China Sea and Baltic might therefore serve as a potent strategic deterrent in its own right.⁶
25. Hence a [major study of 2019](#) by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments titled ‘Taking Back the Seas’ calls for overhauling the US surface fleet’s ‘*capacity for maritime or land strike*’, giving it ‘*an increased importance in deterrence, reassurance, and warfare*’, and thereby making warfare ‘decision-centric’.

26. Both of these suggestions also take into account the fact that the most serious problem confronting the Royal Navy today remains that of manpower—trained personnel.

27. As Ken Booth stressed in his classic examination of *Navies and Foreign Policy* (1977):

‘Conventional deterrence and defence in the contiguous seas have always been—and will remain—the extent of the mission of most of the world’s navies, and it has been an irreducible requirement for even the most ambitious. Naval forces can limit what other states can do to it in its own maritime backyard. Most navies are concerned solely with the independence and integrity of the state in a limited geographical sense, and have no capacity or responsibility for advancing foreign policy beyond this: the navies of most countries do not act ‘over there’, in distant waters/ While the seas are dominated by status quo navies, which the small powers cannot match and/or which they do not perceive as imminent threats, most navies can afford to remain relatively small. But whatever their size, they derive utility by confronting potential intruders with the need to have sufficient incentive and will to cross the important dividing line between shooting and not shooting.’

SUMMARY:

The stated ends of Global Britain in an increasingly competitive age do not seem likely to meet professed means anytime soon. The UK has scarcely emerged from its Brexit ordeal and needs to implement and regulate a whole new array of trade agreements—amidst burning issues like Anglo-French fishing rights, the EU border with Northern Ireland, and the recurring threat of Scottish independence (the breakup of the United Kingdom itself). Now is probably not the time for Britain to plunge into the South China Sea with its new carriers, perhaps hoping to resolve geopolitical disputes the easy way but really the hard way.

Historically speaking, it is likewise easier to alter foreign policy goals than naval shipbuilding production realities. Any Global Britain agenda must reflect that.

If the Committee wishes to discuss any aspect of these points further, please contact me via the Centre for Historical Research.

Very sincerely yours,

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Appendix 1: Centre for Historical Research recent staff publications

Stephen Badsey, *The German Corpse Factory: A Study in First World War Propaganda*, (2019)

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John Buckley (with Paul Beaver), *The Royal Air Force: The First Hundred Years* (2018)

Howard Fuller, *Turret versus Broadside: An Anatomy of British Naval Prestige, Revolution and Disaster, 1860-1870* (2020)

Spencer Jones (ed.), *Catholic General: The Private Wartime Correspondence of Major-General Sir Cecil Edward Pereira, 1914-1919*, (2020)

George Kassimeris, 'What I have learned about countering terrorism in the UK: A conversation with Robert Spencer,' *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, (2021)

Eamonn O'Kane, *The Northern Ireland Peace Process: From Bombs to Brexit*, (2021)

Gary Sheffield, *In Haig's Shadow: Brigadier-General Hugo de Pree and the First World War*, (2019)

Dieter Steinert, *Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit: Erinnerungen jüdischer Kinder 1938-1945* (2018)

Oliver Wilkinson, *British Prisoners of War in First World War Germany*, (2019)

Malcolm Wanklyn, *Parliament's Generals: Supreme Command and Politics during the British Wars 1642-1651*, (2019)

¹ Along with the battlecruiser HMS *Repulse*; a combined loss of 840 British lives at a cost to Imperial Japan of only 4 planes shot down, 28 more damaged, and the lives of 18 airmen.

² See for example Howard J. Fuller, *Empire, Technology and Seapower: Royal Navy Crisis in the Age of Palmerston* (Routledge 2013).

³ Stephen Wentworth Roskill, *The Strategy of Sea Power* (Collins 1962), 88.

⁴ 'The Tory World View: Sea Power, Strategy and Party Politics, 1815-1914', in Jeremy Black, ed., *The Tory World: Deep History and the Tory Theme in British Foreign Policy, 1679-2014* (Routledge 2015), 122. See also J. Y. Wong, 'The Limits of Naval Power: British Gunboat Diplomacy in China from the *Nemesis* to the *Amethyst*, 1839-1949', *War & Society*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (October 2000), 93-120.

⁵ See also Captain Sam J. Tangredi, 'Breaking the Anti-Access Wall', US Naval Institute *Proceedings*, Vol. 141, No. 5 (May 2015), based on his *Anti-Access Warfare: Countering A2/AD Strategies* (Naval Institute Press 2013); and Alexander Clarke on 'Arsenal Ships' as noted by the Phoenix Think Tank (www.phoenixthnktank.org) in 2011.

⁶ See for example even the Cold War-era insights of John P. Craven, 'The Future of the Sea-Based Deterrent', in Jonathan Alford (ed.), *Sea Power and Influence: Old Issues and New Challenges* (International Institute for Strategic Studies 1980), 80-5.