

**Written Evidence submitted by Dr Sidharth Kaushal****House of Commons Defence Committee  
Inquiry into the Navy and Naval Procurement**

I am Dr Sidharth Kaushal, Research Fellow For Sea Power at the Royal United Services Institute. My contribution primarily responds to the committees concerns regarding the Royal Navy's future missions, their implications for strategy and the Royal Navy's capacity to meet its likely requirements.

This submission to the HCDC will focus on the first two questions from the committees terms of reference- what the navy's likely roles and priorities are likely to be moving forward, particularly in light of the tilt to the Indo-Pacific, and what is its capacity to meet its responsibilities. The key points of the submission are

- In the context of supporting NATO, which will increasingly be oriented towards the challenge of the alliances eastern flank, the core wartime role of the navy will be mitigating Russian efforts to use its maritime capabilities-including long range strike-to disrupt civilian infrastructure and thus national will. While constrained by geography and the primacy of the land domain in a high intensity scenario involving Russia in Europe, a carrier centric Royal Navy can also provide the alliance with strategic flexibility. This having been said, a priority focus on undersea warfare will be required to meet the challenges of the European theatre. It is thus not obvious that a primarily carrier centric commitment to the alliance represents the optimal means of achieving these ends though NATO can certainly derive utility from the Royal Navy's aircraft carriers
- Related to this, a trough in the Royal Navy's force of submarines and antisubmarine warfare optimized frigates could represent a significant pinch point in capability if not adequately rectified
- In peacetime competition with Russia, the Royal Navy's carriers can arguably provide the alliance with a degree of flexibility and reach that it would otherwise not have-particularly as the locus of competition shifts towards the southern flank and beyond
- The tilt to the Indo-Pacific could serve both strategic and commercial objectives. However, the UKs options will be constrained both by a lack of regional mass and by a policy distinction between the challenges posed by China and Russia
- To contribute to the maintenance of the status quo in regions where it lacks preponderant mass, the Royal Navy should prioritize enablement over engagement in its interactions with regional partners. Visible presence is less important than identifying the areas where, by imparting specific skills and capabilities the Royal Navy can, to paraphrase George Kennan, reinforce the resilience of natural centres of resistance to revisionism in maritime east asia.

- The Southern Littoral Response Group will be crucial in this capacity and can reinforce regional stability in a number of ways consistent with both resource and political constraints

## NATO

- 1) The main mission for the Royal Navy, per the priorities laid out in the Integrated Review and Defence Command Paper, will be reinforcing NATO deterrence in Europe. In light of the evolving strategic environment, this will increasingly be linked to NATO's Eastern Flank and the Russian challenge. The Russian Navy has seen something of a renaissance over the last decade. As the recipient of the largest share of Russia's State Armament Programme over the last decade, the force has been able to reinvigorate its subsurface capabilities and enhance its ability to affect anti-access area denial (A2AD) strategies.<sup>i</sup> However, the navy is evolving and is not necessarily identical to its Soviet predecessor

The core functions of the navy in Russian strategy are linked to the what General Gerasimov refers to as the "strategy of limited actions"- fighting short local wars. Central to keeping local wars between Russia and one of its neighbours local is inflicting what Russian strategists dub "assigned damage" on potential interveners- i.e NATO member states.<sup>ii</sup> The purpose of assigned damage is to threaten or inflict damage on a target society sufficient to underscore the risks and costs of intervention. The Russian navy and maritime forces can contribute to this in two key ways

- Long range conventional strikes. The "kalibrization" of the Russian navy, which has seen most vessels including those as small as the Buyan and Krakurt corvettes equipped with the 3M-14 Kalibr missile, means that the Russian navy can strike critical infrastructure at reach without venturing far from its ports. The Caspian sea fleet demonstrated this during the 2015 Syrian campaign in which it conducted cruise missile strikes.<sup>iii</sup> In a conflict, the navy would be central to a strike campaign targeting critical national infrastructure in order to deter (or "contain" in Russian parlance) NATO intervention in a war between Russia and a small NATO allied or aligned state on its borders.
- Menacing undersea communications. The special purpose submarines of the Main Directorate of Deep Sea Research (GUGI) are geared towards a range of activities, one of which is tapping or severing undersea communications. This can serve an intelligence function in peacetime and, in conflict, can impose economic costs on an opponent consistent with the idea of assigned damage. While there is no evidence that Russia can cause permanent disruption to what is a relatively resilient undersea cable network, this is not the point.<sup>iv</sup> Per the strategy of assigned damage the object is not to inflict irreversible damage on an opponent but rather to inflict damage on target economies sufficient to make the costs of meeting alliance commitments exceed the perceived benefits in the public's eyes.

In addition to these functions, the Russian navy will play several other roles

- It is expected to be able to achieve sea denial around Russia's shores from bastions such as Kaliningrad and Tartus using both its submarines and a range of ground based missile systems such as the Bastion-P as well as strategic bombers such as the Tu-22M.
  - The Russian navy and naval infantry can support expeditionary operations-albeit on a limited scale. While lacking the capabilities and doctrine for tasks like opposed landings, Russia can sustain expeditionary operations in support of a local partner as its intervention in Syria and its involvement in Libya via the Wagner Group have illustrated.
  - Russia's submarine fleet is evolving to support the sea denial and long range strike missions as priorities over interdicting Atlantic SLOCs. While this latter mission made sense in the context of the Cold War, where any war in Europe would have seen the transit of large numbers of American troops to Europe, in local wars where transatlantic mobilisation is unlikely to occur at the speed of relevance in any case, it arguably carries less weight.<sup>v</sup> That said, it should be assumed that this mission is at least part of Russia's repertoire
  - Finally, as Russia's blockade of the Sea of Azov and its expansive claims in the arctic show, the Russian navy may mirror the actions of the PLAN by attempting to territorialise key maritime arteries by selectively impeding the transit of foreign vessels through them
- 2) The ways in which the navy can best support NATO in this context will in part depend on NATO's Capstone Warfighting Concept and Alliance Maritime Strategy. That said, there are missions it can likely anticipate and prepare for.
- 3) In terms of the Royal Navy's missions and priorities, then, several things will be central to supporting NATO in competition and warfighting
- Securing undersea infrastructure underpinning communications- the navy's planned multi-role ocean surveillance ship may be useful in this respect if equipped, for example, with the capacity to host unmanned assets that can survey activity near critical cables . Tracking the GUGIs special purpose submarines and their larger motherships will also be a critical task for UK and NATO ASW capabilities- and may become the primary purpose for manning the GIUK gap.
  - Managing the Russian submarine threat from forward positions given that submarines may not need to transit the GIUK gap to launch strikes on critical alliance infrastructure or deny the maritime approaches linking partners such as Norway to the rest of the alliance
  - Constraining Russian expeditionary operations along NATO's Southern Flank and beyond
  - Suppressing anti-access capabilities to ensure the resupply of regions such as the Baltics
  - Peacetime competitive actions to ensure freedom of navigation in regions such as the Black Sea

- 4) The current and planned naval force structure raises some considerations in this respect. The scale of the planned ASW capability given the limited number of Type 26 Frigates is of some concern- particularly as these vessels will be split between carrier escort missions and manning key chokepoints in a conflict. The need to neutralise some Russian surface and subsurface capabilities from forward positions- given their ability to conduct strikes from waters close to their shores- will also mean a premium on submarines in future conflict given that these assets can operate more safely in forward positions than surface vessels. The delays to the astute programme represent a significant consideration in this respect.
- 5) The Royal Navy will also likely need to balance presence missions such as freedom of navigation operations in the Black Sea with readiness for warfighting. Since presence missions in heavily contested seas can only be carried out at acceptable levels of military risk by high end platforms capable of defending themselves should circumstances escalate, this is not an area where cheaper assets like the Type 31 can shift burdens from the fleets most valuable assets. The relative paucity of vessels geared towards high end warfighting will thus be a bottleneck- albeit one that could be resolved by the Type 32 frigate in the future.
- 6) The specific capabilities of Royal Navy's future anti-surface missile which will replace the harpoon will be of paramount importance given the importance of both range and speed to delivering effects against a Russian navy operating under the cover of ground based air and anti-ship defences
- 7) The UK Carrier Strike Group can represent a useful means of conducting limited competition with Russia at reach- and represent an expeditionary capability that few NATO members can match. In conflict, given the geography of Russia's maritime periphery and its range of sea denial capabilities, UK CSGs will need to rely heavily on assets such as air to air refuelling capabilities held under the rest of the joint force or at a NATO level if they are to contribute to alliance operations. In the future, longer range unmanned assets may improve the organic reach of the aircraft carrier

## **The Indo Pacific**

- 1) The UK's likely mission set in the Indo-Pacific is going to be heavily constrained both by resource availability and by the political distinction drawn in the recent Integrated Review between China as a systemic competitor and Russia as a threat<sup>vi</sup>
- 2) While deployments such as CSG 21 may signal the growing importance allotted to the region, they represent a transient presence and are unlikely to have a lasting strategic effect
- 3) In terms of the stated aim of reinforcing a rules based order in the region, many of the most significant contributions that the UK can make are likely to be indirect and low visibility operations
- 4) One area in which the navy could play a role is in the imposition or reputational costs for revisionism. Consider the case of the Chinese research vessel Haiyang Dizhi 8, deployed to disputed waters in tandem with a variety of other assets. The Vietnamese government was able to temporarily secure the vessels early withdrawal primarily by generating the information needed to compel regional and international

condemnation.<sup>vii</sup> One can imagine that the Royal Navy could contribute to constraining – though not eliminating- disruptive action in areas like the South China Sea by, for example, using a forward deployed OPV or frigate to independently verify disputant parties claims - with Britain retaining credibility as an external actor with no territorial stake. This will likely see the navy support a civilian led diplomatic approach. In line with the idea of every ship being a station as much as a warfighting platform, bringing actors from across or beyond government to the scene of action to document and publicly verify claims might also be contemplated under certain circumstances. A forward deployed OPV or frigate can probably not do much by way of hard power, but can support a civilian led effort to impose reputational costs of revisionism. Such soft balancing is consistent with both resource and political constraints.

- 5) The navy can also contribute to regional efforts to generate maritime domain awareness in the Indo-Pacific, much as France has through its engagement with India in this area
- 6) Advise and assist missions represent another area where the Royal Navy and Royal Marines can indirectly reinforce the resolve and resilience of regional partners. Given the littoral nature of disputes involving nations such as Vietnam, enhancing the ability of these nations to conduct operations involving disputed littoral islets might be a natural role for the Southern LRG and the future commando forces planned SALT (special advise and liaison) and MLAT (maritime liaison and assessment) teams which will be focused on engaging partners. The planned engagement of the Royal Marines with Japans Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade- though disrupted by typhoons at the time- is arguably proof of concept in this respect.<sup>viii</sup> Partners with local mass but limited institutional capacity in littoral competition may be complimentary to a Royal Navy which has the inverse suite of capabilities regionally
- 7) The capabilities and resourcing of the littoral response groups and future commando force will thus be a critical concern for the committee with respect to the Indo-Pacific
- 8) Nonetheless, the Royal navy will likely find its freedom of action constrained in this region for the foreseeable future and will need to scrupulously select the effects it wishes to deliver with limited capabilities.

*21 June 2021*

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- <sup>i</sup> Julian Cooper. Russia's State Armament Programme Out to 2020: A Quantitative Assessment. (Stockholm:FOI,2020) pp.20
- <sup>ii</sup> Roger McDermott. Gerasimov Unveils Strategy of Limited Actions. Jamestown Foundation. March 16, 2019. <https://jamestown.org/program/gerasimov-unveils-russias-strategy-of-limited-actions/>; Dave Johnson. Russia's Conventional Precision Strike Capabilities: Regional Crises and Nuclear Thresholds. (Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, 2018)
- <sup>iii</sup> Igor Delanoë. Russian Naval Forces in the Syrian War. (Washington D.C:Foreign Policy Research Institute,2020)
- <sup>iv</sup> On the nature of undersea infrastructure see Nicole Starosielski. The Undersea Network (Sign, Storage, Transmission). (Durham and London: Duke University Press,2015)
- <sup>v</sup> On Russias Submarine Fleet see Sidharth Kaushal, James Byrne, Joseph Byrne and Gary Sommerville. The Yasen-M and the Future of Russian Submarine Forces. RUSI Defence Systems. <https://rusi.org/publication/rusi-defence-systems/yasen-m-and-future-russian-submarine-forces>
- <sup>vi</sup> HM Government. Global Britain in a Competitive Age : The Integrated Review of Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. (HM Stationery Office:London,2021)
- <sup>vii</sup> Michael Green, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus. Counter Coercion Series: China Vietnam Oil Rig Standoff. CSIS. <https://amti.csis.org/counter-co-oil-rig-standoff/>
- <sup>viii</sup> Grant Newsham. UK Royal Marines Join Japan Amphibious Forces For Exercise. The National Interest. 2019. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/royal-marines-and-japan-s-amphibious-force-match-made-heaven-30787>