

## Written evidence submitted by Robert Clark

### House of Commons Defence Select Committee

#### *The Navy: purpose and procurement*

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In order to help the remit of this inquiry, the evidence provided below will relate to two central facets which underpin the conceptual understanding of this topic. The first aspect which needs to be examined is what role the Navy should expect to have over the next 20 years. This can broadly be defined as ensuring both domestic and international security. As the Naval fleet increases in size due to recent increases in defence and naval spending, Global Britain will truly become a force for good on the global stage, helping to ensure maritime security in contested waters, whilst operating alongside allies and partners.

In particular, the Carrier Strike Group 21 deployment will conduct freedom of navigation patrols across the contested South and East China Seas over the course of summer 2021, working alongside NATO and regional partners, including Australia and Japan, defending the rules-based system from authoritarian states who seek to control strategic waterways. This global commitment can be expected to continue long after the CSG21 deployment, but questions of sustainability will have to be addressed in order to meet this commitment which the government have set out in various documents.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/975077/Global\\_Britain\\_in\\_a\\_Competitive\\_Age\\_the\\_Integrated\\_Review\\_of\\_Security\\_Defence\\_Development\\_and\\_Foreign\\_Policy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age_the_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf) p.64 See also <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chief-of-the-defence-staff-general-sir-nick-carter-launches-the-integrated-operating-concept>

Following from this the second aspect will be to assess the threats and standing commitments the Navy is likely to face over the same period. The ongoing naval commitments to Middle Eastern security, and to ensuring free and open waters to facilitate international trade – particularly in the Indo-Pacific – are central components to the Navy’s future role.

Determining the geopolitical climate in which the Navy will be expected to operate in over the next 20 years will further elucidate whether there are specific issues in equipment and procurement programmes, that could potentially pose a risk to the Navy’s ability to deliver planned capabilities, and that could ultimately threaten the Navy’s overall effectiveness.

1. The recent Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, laid out the government’s geostrategic priorities for the coming decade. This was encompassed by the Global Britain strategy, which seeks to develop new and ambitious global partnerships, whilst the UK acts as a force for good on the global stage. This includes maintaining European security and the trans-Atlantic alliance, whilst simultaneously advancing an Indo-Pacific strategy that develops emerging markets for British goods and services, and reaffirming mutual security interests across the region; the ‘pivot’ to the Indo-Pacific.
2. In order to achieve this new British strategy, the Integrated Review’s first of several documents, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, highlighted the role in which the Royal Navy will have in ensuring that these strategic priorities are achieved. The first of these examples is highlighting the role of British global leadership. This is helped considerably by the new naval flagship HMS QE2 aircraft carrier, and the current Carrier Strike Group 21 deployment. Specifically, this naval deployment:

*will demonstrate our interoperability with allies and partners – in particular the United States – and our ability to project cutting-edge military power in support of NATO and international maritime security. Her deployment will also help the Government to deepen our diplomatic and prosperity links with allies and partners worldwide.<sup>2</sup>*

3. It is evidenced in the above passage that British naval power will be used as a force for good, helping to support international maritime security. The second ability also highlighted in the above passage reaffirms that the CGS21 deployment will help deepen diplomatic relations with global partners, aiding national prosperity in the

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<sup>2</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/975077/Global\\_Britain\\_in\\_a\\_Competitive\\_Age\\_the\\_Integrated\\_Review\\_of\\_Security\\_Defence\\_Development\\_and\\_Foreign\\_Policy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age_the_Integrated_Review_of_Security_Defence_Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf) p.5.

process. These policies, national and indeed international security, and national prosperity, lie at the heart of Global Britain.

4. The ability for the UK to act as a force for good on the global stage is evident by British leadership across the international maritime domain. As a custodian of the rules-based international order, the UK has routinely championed the freedom of international seas which at risk of falling under the malign intentions of authoritarian states, especially the People's Republic of China (PRC).
5. The PRC continue to maintain territorial control across much of both the South and East China Seas. Laying claim to artificial islands in the South China Sea, Beijing have now built up and militarised much of these and can now effectively sue them to control much of the South China Sea. British imports and exports routinely flow through these waters, which accounts for up to 33% of global trade flows.<sup>3</sup> Ensuring uninterrupted access to these sea lanes of communication (SLOC) remains a strategic priority.
6. The Royal Nave have conducted numerous freedom of navigation patrols across the South China Sea in recent years. It remains likely that the CSG21 deployment may undertake similar such patrols, in conjunction with both US and Australian allies. This remains an important role for the Royal Navy to undertake, to demonstrate the importance of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). As the UK government wish to establish a more forward deployed military posture in the years ahead, ensuring the freedom of navigation patrols across the contested waters of the South and East China Sea, alongside regional partners, should remain a naval priority.
7. However, questions regarding sustainability for such a forward naval presence persist. The government have advocated for a 'persistent' presence in the Indo-Pacific. This must be done alongside regional allies. In particular, a framework for such a persistent presence can be achieved through the Five Powers Defence Agreement (FPDA). Consisting of Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the UK, this framework for regional security consultancy can include the ability for the Navy to significantly burden share its regional commitments in the Indo-Pacific.
8. A recent report by the Henry Jackson Society highlighted how in fact Britain can utilise the FPDA to alleviate logistical, sustainment, and basing considerations,<sup>4</sup> in order for the UK to maintain the desired persistent presence across the Indo-Pacific.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/southeast-asia-will-take-a-major-economic-hit-if-shipping-is-blocked-in-the-south-china-sea/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Carrier-Strike-Group-Rob-new-pdf-edit.pdf>

This presence will likely include a carrier group deployment every two years, with smaller annual deployments. These should be incorporated as much as possible within a FPDA framework.

9. The Integrated Review also highlights the role that the Navy has in defending the UK, and securing British territory against physical incursions:

*The Royal Navy will remain active in the UK's territorial sea and Exclusive Economic Zone, including by investing in new capabilities to protect undersea CNI.*

10. The addition in this text of the UK's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is firmly in direct relation to the increasing Russian military activity spotted along the British coast, particularly submarine and warship activity in the North Sea and the English Channel, and Russian jets across the North Sea approaching Scotland. Highlighting the extent to which Russian military activity occurs in close proximity to the British Isles, during September 2020 the RAF were crashed out on three separate occasions in six days to intercept Russian jets,<sup>5</sup> with nine Russian vessels spotted off the British coastline.

11. The undersea CNI (Critical National Infrastructure) relates primarily to the deep undersea cables at the bottom of the English Channel and the North Atlantic. Undersea cables carry some 97% of internet traffic and roughly \$10 trillion worth of daily financial transactions,<sup>6</sup> leaving them highly susceptible and potentially vulnerable to attack or disruption. The UK faces this threat from the Russian submarine activity in those very waters which the nation's CNI is located under. This remains a significant and credible threat from Russia; an attacks against the nation's undersea cables would cause chaos and catastrophe to the UK's security apparatus and day to day banking and commercial sectors.

12. The risk that Russia in particular poses to the UK's underwater cables was further clarified in the Integrated Review's subsequent Defence Command Paper:

*Russia is investing in and developing significant underwater capabilities, including deep-sea capabilities which can threaten undersea cables.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/09/17/raf-intercepts-russian-jets-third-time-six-days/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-royal-navy-surveillance-ship-to-protect-the-uks-critical-underwater-infrastructure>

<sup>7</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/974661/CP411\\_-\\_Defence\\_Command\\_Plan.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974661/CP411_-_Defence_Command_Plan.pdf) p.14

13. The severity of the nation's underwater CNI vulnerability cannot be overstated, particularly in light of the increasing Russian military activity around British waters. In the event of a conventional or even potentially a sub-threshold conflict between the UK and Russia, the underwater cables would be amongst the first of Russia's targets in order to disrupt and incapacitate a British response. The vulnerability of Britain's underwater cables has been described as an 'existential threat' to the nation by the UK government.<sup>8</sup>
14. However, serious concerns remains for the UK's ability to protect against this threat. In March 2021, as part of the government's Defence Command Paper, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) announced the new Multi Role Ocean Surveillance ship (MROSS), due in service by 2024.<sup>9</sup> The in service date of 2024, now only two and a half years away, is a seriously short lead-time. The contract has yet to go to tender, with no initial projected costs given. This remains a significantly worrying lack of planning to protect against what the MoD described as an existential threat. The MoD may choose to purchase an existing vessel, adding the appropriate surveillance equipment required. This remains unlikely however when considering the Prime Minister's pledge to revitalise British shipbuilding, and the Defence Command Paper states that Scottish shipyards will likely benefit from the new MROSS.<sup>10</sup>
15. The broader threat posed to the UK's national security from Russia was further expanded upon in the Defence Command Paper:

*Russia continues to pose the greatest nuclear, conventional military and sub-threshold threat to European security. Modernisation of the Russian armed forces, the ability to integrate whole of state activity and a greater appetite for risk, makes Russia both a capable and unpredictable actor.<sup>11</sup>*

16. Given the frequency of Russian military activity around Britain, and the credible threat posed by Russia to the UK more broadly, but in particular in their investment in to developing significant underwater capabilities which can threaten undersea cables, then it remains of paramount priority that the MoD should announce a more detailed strategy for mitigating against this 'existential threat' posed by Russia towards the UK. This includes announcing to tender for the MROSS contract, or if

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-royal-navy-surveillance-ship-to-protect-the-uks-critical-underwater-infrastructure>

<sup>9</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/974661/CP411\\_-\\_Defence\\_Command\\_Plan.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974661/CP411_-_Defence_Command_Plan.pdf) p.52

<sup>10</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/974661/CP411\\_-\\_Defence\\_Command\\_Plan.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974661/CP411_-_Defence_Command_Plan.pdf) p.65

<sup>11</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/974661/CP411\\_-\\_Defence\\_Command\\_Plan.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974661/CP411_-_Defence_Command_Plan.pdf) p.10

not, which vessels will be purchased or refitted to this role. The MoD's strategy must also include a full costings for the project, and a detailed timeframe for how these vessels will be in service for the projected date of 2024.

17. A further role which the Navy can expect to continue is providing capability for the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC). Based in Bahrain, the IMSC provides regional security across the maritime domain against primarily Iranian aggression around the Arabian Gulf, but also covers counter-narcotics and freedom of passage for international ships around the Strait of Hormuz.
18. Due to the considerable strategic emphasis which the UK has long placed on the Middle East, the government should consider augmenting the IMSC's capabilities, particularly in light of continued Iranian aggression towards the UK, the US, and regional allies including Saudi Arabia and Israel. This more active role should include; deterring Iranian attacks on international shipping; preventing illegal ship seizures; and countering the increasing threat from Iran's Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV), and suicide drone technology.
19. In addition, the UK government should consider fully operationalising the 'permanent deployment' of a Type 23 frigate to OP KIPION, based in Bahrain. HMS Montrose, currently on permanent deployment, is set to be retired early and decommissioned in 2022. The loss of HMS Montrose will leave a capability gap in the IMSC's ability to provide security for its members in the region.
20. Given Iran's increasingly destabilising actions, the UK government must make necessary additions to the IMSC of Royal Navy assets, including enhancing the IMSC's ability to counter the threat from Iran's increasingly sophisticated UAV drone technology. The range of drones affords Iran a new strategic depth as well as providing an effective anti-access/area denial capability across the Red Sea and the Sea of Oman. The Royal Navy, who will be operating across the region with the Carrier Strike Group in summer 2021, must take this into consideration.
21. Furthermore, the Royal Navy will soon replace the mine countermeasure vessels (MCMV) with an autonomous mine-hunting capability, developed in partnership with France. The Royal Navy MCMV mitigates against the threat of Iranian attacks on international shipping across the region, often caused by Iranian mines. The Royal Navy should strengthen this capability in future autonomous minehunters, in light of Iran's increased use of mine warfare against international shipping in the Gulf.
22. Finally, the IMSC would also further benefit from the introduction of the Royal Navy Scimitar Class fast patrol boats. These craft can act quickly enough to interdict illegal

Iranian ship seizures, to which larger destroyers and frigates are too slow to react. This would substantially aid regional security.

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