

Written evidence submitted by Chris Cope

The use of the military in countering migrant crossings in the Channel/ Operation Isotrope

Introduction

By way of introduction, my name is Chris Cope. I am a lawyer and journalist. For the last 30 years, I have been the parliamentary correspondent to the bi-monthly magazine, Warship World. I also served in the Royal Naval Reserve for seven years between 1979 and 1986.

What assets will be engaged?

1. If the government has now decided that the Navy should be involved in countering migrant crossings in the Channel, the obvious question is whether the Navy will be acting simply in an advisory capacity or, more likely, become involved with the deployment of assets. If the latter, then what assets would be available?
2. Clearly, major warships such as destroyers and frigates would be wholly inappropriate for this type of operation. That leaves patrol vessels and minehunters.

Patrol vessels

3. There are two classes in service, namely the River 1 class dating from 2002/03 and the River 2 class completed in 2018/19.
4. The original proposal was that the River 2 class would replace the River 1 class which were primarily operated in a fishery protection role. Indeed, the second of class, HMS Severn, was decommissioned in October 2017. In November 2018, the Defence Secretary, Gavin Williamson, announced that the River 1 class would be retained in service for additional years and in fact HMS Severn has since been recommissioned.
5. Although the River 1 class would be the obvious candidate for assisting with regard to the surveillance of migrant crossings in the Channel, there would then be a gap with regard to the naval vessels available for fishery protection duties. Now that the UK has left the EU, fishery protection is more important than ever. I would suggest that using the River 1 class for surveillance of migrant crossings would be a retrograde step.
6. The government's policy with regard to the River 2 class (all of which are now in service) is that they should be forward deployed and operate overseas. The present situation is that HMS Forth is in the Falklands, HMS Medway in the Caribbean, HMS Trent in the Mediterranean and HMS Tamar and HMS Spey

are in the Far East. It has also been confirmed that HMS Tamar and HMS Spey will remain in the Far East, largely operating in the Pacific, for at least the next five years.

7. There is a suggestion that the Type 31 frigates may replace the River 2s, in due course. The River 2s would then return to the UK and may, at that stage, replace the River 1s, which would then, presumably, be decommissioned. However, this will not occur for some years.
8. It seems clear that the River 2 class would not be available for countering migrant crossings in the Channel.

Minehunters (or Mine Countermeasures Vessels [MCMVs])

9. The Navy is presently introducing fundamental changes with regard to the way in which it counters mines in home waters and overseas. The Navy is now committed to introducing an autonomous minehunting system which will, in due course, replace the existing Hunt and Sandown classes.

Hunt class

10. There are presently six ships in service, which were completed between 1981 and 1985. Of the other ships in the original class, only one remains, namely HMS Brecon which is a static training ship. The remainder have been sold overseas.

Sandown class

11. There are five in service, namely HMS Penzance, HMS Pembroke, HMS Grimsby, HMS Bangor and HMS Shoreham. These ships were completed between 1998 and 2001.
12. HMS Ramsay and HMS Blyth were decommissioned last year and it is understood that these ships will be sold to the Ukraine, depending upon the outcome of the imminent conflict.
13. HMS Cromer is used for static training. HMS Walney is laid-up in dry dock at Portsmouth and has been in that condition for some ten years.
14. It has also been reported that three of the surviving five ships may be sold to Bangladesh.
15. All the indications are that the MoD is keen initially to dispose of the Sandown class, which of course are much smaller than the Hunt class. The Sandowns are 600 tons with a crew of 34. The Hunts are of 750 tons and have a crew of 50.

16. Although the MoD has not disclosed its plans for the future of the Hunt class (namely HMS Ledbury, HMS Cattistock, HMS Brocklesby, HMS Middleton, HMS Chiddingfold and HMS Hurworth), in view of the speed at which the MoD has previously disposed of redundant assets, one can be fairly sure that, upon decommissioning, the Hunt class will quickly be sold overseas.
17. In evidence to the Commons Defence Committee on 2nd November 2021, Vice Admiral Gardner said that autonomous minehunting systems will be deployed to the Gulf from 2023. The present arrangement is that two Sandowns and two Hunts operate in the Gulf and are replaced by other ships on a rotation basis.
18. If these two classes are no longer required in a minehunting capacity, they could be used for patrol purposes and would be ideally suited to countering migrant crossings in the Channel. A new role for these ships would mean some degree of conversion, in that the minehunting equipment would be redundant and should be removed. Both classes are armed with a single 30mm gun and two mini-guns. However, armament would be irrelevant if these ships were operating in a migrant crossing surveillance role.
19. Although the Hunt class have now been in service for nearly 40 years, there is no reason why they should not continue in service for a considerable time, bearing in mind that having GRP hulls, they are almost indestructible. Only machinery needs modernisation or replacement. The Sandown class are of similar build.

Recommendation

20. In the long term, upon the decommissioning of the remaining six Hunt class minehunters and five Sandown class minehunters, some of these ships be retained not only for migrant crossing surveillance purposes, but also to enhance the fishery protection ships, of which, as referred to above, only three are in service to patrol Britain's extensive waters.
21. The proposed sale of the three Sandown class minehunters to Bangladesh should be rescinded. There should be no further sale of any ships of either class to overseas navies.
22. In the short term, there is no reason why some minehunters should not immediately be deployed for migrant crossing purposes.
23. In addition, consideration should be given to recommissioning HMS Brecon, HMS Cromer and HMS Walney. The present role of HMS Brecon and HMS Cromer as static training ships could easily be replicated elsewhere. HMS

Walney has been for sale for some years, with no bids, to date. Clearly, there would need to be a degree of expenditure in recommissioning these ships, which could prove to be prohibitive.

24th January 2022