

THE RUSI MARITIME WORKSHOP SERIES 2010

Interim Report

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This paper examines elements of the naval contribution to British defence and security, summarising discussion at the first three of a series of four maritime workshops hosted by RUSI in 2010. The paper will begin with some broad remarks, before focusing on the particular themes of the three workshops: conflict prevention; flexibility in future naval ships; and Littoral Manoeuvre. The workshops were held in the pre-

election period while the Ministry of Defence (MoD) Green Paper was being developed. A final, fuller paper will follow after the fourth workshop, which was postponed until Autumn 2010 due to the pre-election purdah. The workshops are designed to feed into the debates at RUSI's annual Future Maritime Operations Conference, which in 2010 is looking at 'The Naval Service Contribution to Future British Defence and Security'.

Introduction

On 14 June, the Secretary of State for Defence Dr Liam Fox told an audience at RUSI that while the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) is confronting 'the harsh facts of the economic climate... [and while] it may be resource-informed, it is policy-led.'¹ Dr Fox set out the UK's policy priorities, arguing that although Afghanistan would remain the UK's 'top priority', achieving success there must not inhibit the effective conduct of other operational commitments today, 'such as defending the Falklands, training missions in Iraq or counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden'. He also argued strongly that the UK must balance the SDSR to meet both current challenges and a range of 'dangerous and

unpredictable alternative futures': the UK also must not assume that 'future conflicts will mirror the current ones'. In taking a long-term approach to defence and security, Dr Fox stated that conventional deterrence, conflict prevention and defence diplomacy would be critical in enabling the development of a sustainable defence policy and a capability programme 'structured first to deter and second to deliver the use of force in support of our national interest and to protect national security.'

The Maritime Contribution

The UK is an island nation, which relies upon the use of the sea to protect its physical borders, to secure

1 Secretary of State for Defence the Rt Hon Dr Liam Fox MP. Speech to the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies (RUSI) conference 'Time for Trade-Offs: the Strategic Defence and Security Review 2010', 14 June 2010. Speech available on-line at: <<http://www.rusi.org/events/past/ref:E4BE420B71D43A/info:public/infoID:E4C10E45E74A53/>>.

Dr Fox had announced the SDSR in a speech to defence staff on his first day in office. See: Ministry of Defence, 'New Secretary of State Sends Message to Defence Staff', 12 May 2010. Available on-line at: <<http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/DefenceNews/DefencePolicyAndBusiness/NewSecretaryOfStateSendsMessageToDefenceStaff.htm>>. Accessed 23 June 2010.

its overseas territories, to sustain its economy and national prosperity, to support its global interests, and to make a major contribution to international stability. The military instrument has its greatest utility when used in a flexible, scalable manner, which generates political choice.

The maritime component's free use of the sea multiplies the contribution of its unique strategic assets to the joint national defence and security effort. Maritime forces provide autonomous, sustainable, robust, flexible and responsive procedures, capabilities and operations, and have significant ability to make a wider – and smarter – contribution than just high-end warfighting prowess.

National Interest

Like any state, the UK has unique national interests. It needs a national sense of potential strategic threats to these interests, and sense of how to address such threats. It also needs to be able to act independently or in partnership as and when required to protect these interests. Looking into an uncertain, unpredictable and complex future, the UK's need to contribute to the stability of the international system will only increase – as, simultaneously, will its reliance upon that system and upon access to critical resources like energy supplies. The debate over which interests to address and why needs to be framed in the context of what is important to the nation. In times of financial and strategic uncertainty, properly resourcing the Armed Forces is important, as they arguably can operate as the night watchman of the state. The UK must balance what it wants to do against what it can afford to do, and must ask what it can afford not to do – or even not afford not to do.

The maritime component offers a network of political, military, economic, social and other influences which can support UK strategic objectives. When such strategic objectives include conflict prevention, counter-terrorism, non-proliferation, nuclear and conventional deterrence, strategic intelligence gathering, energy security and maritime security, the importance of a robust maritime contribution should be clear. In recent years, the strategic significance of the maritime environment has become more widely recognised across government in the UK – such as in the National Security Strategy, the latest iteration of which is expected this summer and will

provide a framework for informing the SDSR. It also has become a more significant issue internationally. There is a strong argument that, as a major maritime power, the UK should make a robust contribution to the security of the maritime environment both nationally and within international partnerships and frameworks.

The Changing Character of Conflict

The end of the Cold War, the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and the post-Iraq and Afghanistan waning of international appetite for liberal intervention together have changed the character of conflict in dramatic ways. Amongst the major Western powers, including the UK, there has been a political, military and social revision of if, why and how to use the military instrument.

As Dr Fox stated at RUSI, the UK 'will need to retain the capacity to deploy military strength in defence of our national interests'. This will include the need to retain significant capacity to conduct high-end warfare. Very few nations have the credible ability to conduct high-end warfare, so this 'hard' end remains a strategic asset for the UK. The 'hard' end also must be sufficiently agile to respond to a range of different conflict scenarios.

Presence

Whether addressing state or non-state threats, one critical tool the Royal Navy provides is its ability to maintain sustained, long-term global presence at the place and time of choice without legal constraint. Such presence enables the conduct of defence diplomacy, the development of regional frameworks to reduce the risk of conflict, the build-up of strategic and tactical intelligence pictures, and the opportunity to demonstrate interest and commitment. Maritime force levels must match the UK's aspirations to generate that global presence. Other government departments (OGDs) – who generally do not possess their own maritime assets – recognise and make use of the Royal Navy's ability to generate short-notice presence where required.

Given the current fiscal circumstances, presence as a conflict prevention tool may offer significant value for money. However, its effects remain difficult to identify, define and measure in empirical terms. That success occurs when nothing happens is a

difficult political and fiscal case to make. However, overt demonstrations of the effective use of naval presence to provide crisis stability or conflict prevention – such as the deployments of significant multi-national (including UK) naval assets to the Lebanon in 2006 and Haiti in 2010 – should provide public (if not empirical) evidence.

The Defence Contribution to Conflict Prevention

The defence contribution to conflict prevention is one of many tools a government should possess in developing an ability to maintain global stability and security. For the UK, because of its global standing and desire to contribute to global stability, there will remain a need to be able to conduct military interventions. However, in future the intervention entry bar will be set much higher in political terms. Conflict prevention is becoming a higher political priority amongst many nations. With the cost of enduring interventions becoming more significant in budgetary and political terms, conflict prevention may deliver better political outcomes and better value for money.

Conflict prevention needs to be viewed as a strategic concept, in terms of addressing long-term threats to national interests, as much as it does – if not more so – than being a tactical response during a particular crisis. Preventing different types of conflict and at different phases in the escalation of a crisis requires a strategic, whole-of-government approach. The UK Government is looking to improve its understanding of where and how the different parts of government, the private sector and all elements of national influence can contribute to effective conflict prevention. This will require both the MoD and OGDs to develop greater levels of co-operation, communication and understanding of each other's issues, cultures, perspectives and potential contributions. While the military component often will find itself required to operate in a 'supporting' rather than 'supported' role, there are clear circumstances where a military lead makes sense. The credibility of the hard end of the capability spectrum possessed by major maritime nations underpins UK regional policies for stability, capacity-building and other conflict prevention mechanisms. Forward deploying naval forces is vital in gathering the strategic intelligence critical to effective conflict prevention in higher-risk areas, and in providing reassurance to friendly governments in areas of interest.

Partnering and co-operation to deliver influence at a global level is core business for navies. The strategic value of the 'free good' navies provide – the strategic flexibility, choice and value they bring in supporting defence and security interests in routine operations – is something which is not always appreciated in public circles. The Green Paper initiated an examination of whether (and to what degree) the requirement for conflict prevention should be a force driver and be resourced accordingly, and of how to measure success in conflict prevention. This work is ongoing in the SDSR.

Different circumstances may require different approaches to conflict prevention. Thus, preparing for greater focus on conflict prevention does not mean reducing focus on high-end capacity. Keeping the credibility of the high-end capability to enable a range of political choices and strategic effects remains essential. Moreover, deterrence and conflict prevention are subjective concepts: a lack of strategic commitment to defence capability and spending can signal a lack of resolve.

Naval Capabilities: Changing the Narrative

Warships have wider utility than just warfighting. One critical challenge facing the MoD is to demonstrate that investment in flexible and adaptable naval capabilities will help 'future proof' UK defence and security interests, and may in the longer term offer better value for money than other policy options such as intervention. In future ship classes, the MoD will seek to develop *flexibility* to swiftly configure ships from one role to another and *adaptability* to upgrade the ships over time. New ships will have both, maximising future relevance and providing government with greater choice in their use. OGDs must be involved in designing today the capabilities and CONOPS (concepts of operations) of the very ships they will utilise in cross government work tomorrow.

The way in which navies operate – being able to deploy rapidly, at distance, autonomously and for sustained periods – creates flexibility in itself. However, it is not possible to provide flexibility for every circumstance.

The Future Surface Combatant Programme

The Royal Navy's new Type-26 frigate, the core element of the Future Surface Combatant

programme (FSC), will be a key platform in the new approach to delivering improved flexibility and adaptability. But improving flexibility and adaptability can add complexity and, in turn, risk cost increase in design, build and through life phases. This creates a significant challenge for the MoD and the defence industrial complex in delivering platforms sufficient in both capability and number at a time when the public and political debate about warship costs is very emotive. The need for flexibility applies to people as well, introducing recruiting and training challenges in providing the right balance of skills sets and mind sets to support the equipment configuration.

Balancing the force level and capability mix will be especially important in the FSC case, given that ship classes in the programme will be in service beyond 2070. The in-built flexibility and adaptability will need to allow the platform to be upgraded with technology and to adapt to shifts in the strategic landscape. At a time of constrained financial circumstances, understanding value rather than cost will be crucial in the success of the FSC programme. One part of balancing the cost equation for FSC will be the ability to develop ship variants which are exportable.

Numbers

Despite the emphasis on the maritime contribution to an expeditionary approach in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, the number of major combatants in the Royal Navy has been halved over the last twelve years. The Royal Navy needs ships for both high-end and lower-end purposes. Retaining the capacity to conduct high-end operations remains crucial. Lower-end tasks like conflict prevention are becoming more critical in terms of national security and interests, and require sustained presence which itself mandates sufficient numbers. The challenge is to develop enough ships with enough flexibility within whatever budget is allocated to ensure that force levels can support the UK's global interests. Fewer ships mean less flexibility. A ship cannot be in two places at once. Flexibility in capability is one thing, but flexibility as a whole cannot be delivered without enough ships.

The UK's Amphibious Capability and Littoral Manoeuvre

While long-term interventions may be less desirable in public and political terms, there may still be a

requirement to intervene in certain circumstances. The sea can provide political and military options to intervene quickly with a light footprint ashore, and then to withdraw to a sea base and maintain overwatch as required. With 67 per cent of states having a coastline, and with the number of failing states increasing, the need for intervention from the sea may well be increasing.

Any major global power will require the ability to project and withdraw forces from a seaborne littoral environment. The ability to manoeuvre, to generate situational awareness, to identify and pressurise centres of gravity and to react rapidly are fundamental requirements for the use of the military instrument in generating a range of political effects. Doing this from a large, self-contained, mobile sovereign base poised in international waters is one of the significant and unique contributions of the maritime component to British defence and security.

The Royal Marines have made a significant contribution in Afghanistan. However, the ability to deploy forces ashore from the sea is a specialist task and, with the exceptions of the recent high-profile training operations Taurus, Cold Response and Auriga, the ability to generate and sustain this capability has been subject to lower resourcing priority than other operations.

The UK's amphibious capability is stronger today than for some time. However, investment in each of its elements (personnel, equipment, amphibious and support shipping, and training) is critical to ensuring the balance and the effectiveness of the capability. The adaptability of the amphibious capability provided by the Royal Marines and the Royal Navy and the ability to operate it in partnership with other nations underlines its core contribution to some of the central tenets of the SDSR process. With its responsiveness, flexibility and adaptability, this unique, core national joint defence capability is a strategic asset. Second only in global size to the United States Marine Corps (USMC), it is the kind of capability the US looks for its partners to provide and is one which Dr Fox argues the UK must retain if it wishes to remain a top flight power. The UK must assess the scale of such capability required to match its global interests and provide adequate resource to underpin it.