

**MARITIME STRATEGY AND BRITISH NATIONAL SECURITY**

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## Maritime Strategy and British National Security

I must thank RUSI and the Royal Navy for the honour of this invitation to speak following the First Sea Lord. I assume that I was selected for my celebrated modesty, reasonableness, diplomacy and brevity. While I hope that I am modest, reasonable, and diplomatic, I do intend to speak today with the freedom that academe demands, but which responsible officials usually cannot. By way of an opening shot across the bows, I do not believe it is true to claim that there are no villains in our recent British defence grand narrative. It is a little tempting to shrug one's shoulders and attempt to explain our current discontents with reference to Harold Macmillan's famous, and wise, almost dismissive phrase, "events, dear boy, events". Events, unpredictable circumstances, have a lot to answer for. But, I put it to you that Britain has not been entirely the helpless plaything of a malign chance. We need a new Defence Review, but not only because the world has changed; it always changes, surprises always happen. A goodly fraction of the reason why we need to review Britain's future defence course, is because our recent defence effort has been cumulatively under-resourced, it has supported some very poor policy, it has lacked strategic guidance worthy of the name. Our tactics have not always been wonderful either. But, tactics can be corrected to good effect, if strategy, and above all, policy, is intelligent. And they have not been. I feel moved to quote from the American historian Carlo D'Este's excellent recent military biography of Winston Churchill. D'Este writes

Therein lies the fundamental dilemma of the role of the military in a democracy: generals take their orders from politicians but have the right to expect that their orders are purposeful. The reality is that wars too numerous to mention since the Second World War have proved that more often than not the politicians have got it wrong.

What is my mission here? It is to complement Sir Jonathon's story, in some cases in ways that he cannot, for obvious reasons. I must hasten to add that my views are strictly my own. I do not know whether or not Sir Jonathon agrees with them, and I think it may be best if I do not ask him.

I suspect that there are some well organized people with wonderfully orderly minds in this audience, so, I shall try to hide the real me, which tends to see everything as interconnected, holistic, and rather disordered, even chaotic. Instead, I will attempt to be obedient to the following batting order of themes: (1) strategy; (2) maritime Britain; (3) defence planning and uncertainty; and (4) resources for defence. Time may defeat me, but I shall do my best. Time has always been the least forgiving of strategy's many dimensions. Sir Jonathon has discussed these themes among others – I am pleased to follow in his wake, though I may appear to risk overtaking him in some regards.

### Strategy

If you do not do strategy, or you do it badly, you usually lose, in peace, in war, and in times of warlike peace. Should you not believe this, I would refer you to the German experience of serial strategic incompetence in the twentieth century. The Germans, repeatedly, were in a class of their own at fighting, but fortunately for us they did not do strategy. To tread on more contestable ground, I can argue that our behaviour in Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s illustrates generously how costly it can be when strategy, and I must add, policy, is not fit for purpose.

In order to appreciate what the Navy can do for you there is no substitute for strategic thinking. Strategy is about consequences. It is manifested, or should be, in plans – sometimes called strategies – that explain how particular scarce means will be employed so as to achieve identified goals. Military, and other, ways and means are chosen and executed by strategy for their predicted

consequences. My view is wholly Corbettian, and Sir Julian Corbett was very substantially Clausewitzian. I insist that Britain requires, indeed can only have, a maritime strategy. And what is that? Julian Corbett tells us that '[by] maritime strategy we mean the principles which govern a war in which the sea is a substantial factor'. And that is more than good enough for me. Sir Julian proceeded to explain that '[n]aval strategy is but that part of it which determines the movements of the fleet when maritime strategy has determined what part the fleet must play in relation to the action of the land forces; for it scarcely needs saying that it is almost impossible that a war can be decided by naval action alone'. This is not to demean the significance of naval strategy. Obviously, if your naval strategy is a failure, so must be your maritime strategy. The navy is our greatest, our most flexible and adaptable strategic enabling agent, as well as being an instrument that can itself directly deliver much tactical effect for operational, strategic, and political consequences.

May I suggest that it can be useful to consider Britain's national security with respect to the relative contributions made by three metaphorical compasses: the moral, the political, and the strategic. May I suggest, also, that for several years in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the British political leadership was unduly in thrall to its moral compass, at the expense of paying due diligence to the political and strategic compasses. To be blunt, a policy of forceful intervention to do good in distinctly foreign lands may well suit admirably the implicit advice of your moral compass. But, if the policy goals are not achievable, indeed can be predicted to be unachievable, a fairly pure heart will not save you from political and strategic disaster. Also, if you have read and understood your Clausewitz, or simply listened to the tales from experience, you should know that friction, unpleasant surprise, disorder, even chaos, are quite normal characteristics of the enterprises of state, great and small. The Anglo-American liberal way of war over the past decade reminds me of the impresario's answer in the movie 'Shakespeare in Love', when he was challenged to explain how the obvious mess of the play's preparation could possibly be sorted for its first night. He replied that he did not know, it was a mystery, but somehow it would all come right on the night. Well, in strategic history,

more often than not, confusion does not mysteriously sort itself out; instead, it leads to bloody and expensive confusion.

Much of the tactical and other problems Britain's armed forces have had to contend with over the past decade, stem massively from the absence of the necessary political and strategic compasses. Our national security, and more narrowly our defence, debate in Britain is hindered by the spurious authority of false alternatives, absent priorities, and a failure to recognize vacuous buzzwords for the hindrance to clear thinking that they are. I do recognize that our fashionable jargon, especially the buzzwords, often has coded meaning to its users. You will have noticed that of recent years such words as comprehensive and balance have been employed as a mantra. The acid test for the merit in a concept is the sense, or lack of it, in its antonym. If the concept of an unbalanced fleet makes no sense, then it is odds on that the attractive, indeed irresistible, notion of a balanced fleet is not quite the pure gold that it pretends to be. Balance and lack of balance is a discriminatory idea that has no inherent content. Balanced against our needs? Balanced among major functions? Balanced between high and low end technologies (the concept of a hi-lo mix for affordability). What I am suggesting is that the proposition that we should pursue a balanced strategy – as U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert Gates demands – is as obviously sensible as it is naked of specific meaning.

But, there is a sense to the 'balance' debate that does have integrity, and that is the requirement to decide by how much, if at all, we are willing to mortgage Britain's future national security, in the interest of better resourcing current and very near-term military operations. That is a meaningful issue-area, though I believe it should not be all that difficult to resolve – for reasons I will explain, should time permit.

We tell ourselves, correctly, that strategy requires choices and priorities. But, to recognize that is not to make the choices and priorities necessary, nor, indeed, is it to decide which choices and how much prioritisation are required. In mathematics-speak, what is the algorithm that enables us to

operationalise our prudent recognition of the need for choice and priorities. We have to beware lest we fall victim to platitudes and buzzwords that appear to offer more than they can. It is good to be flexible, adaptable, and to endorse the necessity for choice, and so forth. But such high sounding wisdom on our part actually resolves nothing, zip as the American put it with a brutally terse eloquence.

### Maritime Britain

British national security and defence policy must rest on maritime strategy. There is no choice. It is simply a matter of geography. We are an archipelago utterly dependent upon free access to the sea, and, as an historian once noticed, ‘all the seas of the world are one’. Whether the grand narrative at issue is political, economic, or military, Britain is predominantly a maritime nation, period! Technologies wax and wane, but our maritime character is so stable that truly it is more accurate to refer to our maritime nature. Of course, the tactical detail of the strategic plot alters over time, but the enduring reality is one of high significance for the maritime contribution to British security (including prosperity). For a couple of historical illustrations of this claim, one actual, one mercifully only fanciful, let me remind you that we had no fewer than three notable enquiries into invasion dangers early in the twentieth century: in 1903, 1907, and, finally, in 1913. In all cases it was determined that the peril could not be realised, so long as the Royal Navy remained either superior to any foe or combination of foes, or at least still potent as much of a ‘fleet in being’. For my fanciful example of the blessings of insularity, and hence the vital importance of the sea, consider how a Channel tunnel would have figured on Winston Churchill’s already long worry list in the Summer of 1940. Since God obviously intended Britain to be an island in historical times, why would strategically prudent Britons wish to second-guess Him?

My next point may sound frivolous, but I don’t believe that it is. How best to put this? Geography is not ‘joint’. If you go to your atlas, I predict that you will have some difficulty locating

the joint environment. Jointness and all its ancillary, dependent, wordage, is an intellectual construct. If we deploy the word too casually, we are in danger of reification, which is to say, of coming to believe that a truly abstract notion has some material reality. The very plain fact is that all operations, no matter how joint in design, have to be executed in actual, distinctive physical geographies, of which there are five (land, sea – on and under – air, space, and the electromagnetic spectrum).

### Defence Planning and Uncertainty

One sentence that you will never find in a defence review document is the admission that the greatest danger to British national security derives from the possibility, or should I say probability, of folly in government policy. It is hard to hedge against this all too familiar historical phenomenon. Even a first-rate military machine will fail to deliver what is asked of it, if it is asked to accomplish tasks that are beyond it. Or, such an excellent military may succeed in achieving what it is politically unwise to achieve. The facts are that governments are apt to be foolish, in common with their electorates, which is to say ‘us’, also they are certain to be surprised by many events, sometimes unpleasantly, and they can be just unlucky, through no fault of their own – or all of the above, together. The only protection against occasional serious foolishness in British policy and strategy, and against the malign effects of surprise, is a defence posture that is robust in coping with largely unpredictable unwelcome events. The two guiding principles for defence planning have to be: (1) a determination to get the biggest things ‘right enough’; and, as a consequence, (2) to achieve a stable condition of minimum feasible regrets. Such buzzwords as flexibility, adaptability, comprehensive, priorities, choice, and balance, can make sense when they are informed by these two master principles.

When you try to consider British national security far into the twenty-first century, the relevance of the two principles becomes readily compelling. To take just three, admittedly non-random, examples, for my argument: *Trident*, the two large carriers, and the SSN building programme. *Trident* is about the crown jewels of our national security, and should we abandon its modernisation it would be functionally irreplaceable. So many and serious are the actual and potential hazards to our security in the future that I admit to having some difficulty respecting arguments for SSBN abandonment. Similarly, the carriers and the *Astutes* have such broad domains of strategic utility for our deeply uncertain future, that it is a stretch for me to consider opposition to them as fairly as perhaps I ought.

The problem, as always, for the big ticket items in a defence posture, is that the financial costs are as certain as the security benefits are uncertain in any detail. Given the contributions that a well enough resourced maritime security posture and strategy can make in the form of undesirable happenings that are discouraged, prevented, or thwarted at their initiation, it is always a challenge to make the case for expensive capabilities. And the Navy is, and has always been, relatively expensive when it is assessed, unsoundly, in absolute terms. Inherently it is quite simple to calculate the resource costs to the nation of the Royal Navy. It is exceedingly difficult to offer anything other than generalities concerning the benefits to national safety, prosperity, and well being, many years from now. Pay today, enjoy tomorrow, is not a politically attractive proposition. The evidence problem for the effectiveness of the Navy is especially severe given that its greatest value will be found in events that fail to occur because of its influence.

### Debating British National Security and Defence

Unfortunately for persuasive argument, just about every major stakeholder in our current defence debate is largely correct. The Army is obviously right in claiming that it is not really fit for the number and particular quality of purposes to which it has been set by the government. The Navy

is too small for its global bag of duties; while the RAF similarly is underfunded. Truly is it claimed that we British do irony. I think of that when I stumble across the glorious official concept of ‘smart procurement’. Dare I say it, but even our beloved Treasury is right in the defence debate – given the financial direction it must apply from the government.

The British ironist in me wants to invent a telling witty Chinese proverb or two that would cover our recent and current disorder in policy, strategy, and posture. Suffice it for me to say that I am supposed to be a professor of Strategic Studies, and I am appalled, both professionally and as a citizen, a fully paid-up member of the British political nation, by the high incompetence that is our recent national security and defence story. How clever do you need to be to appreciate that if you have an ambitious foreign policy you need a military instrument to match. If you are thoroughly maritime dependent, as is, and will remain, the UK, your national security policy and defence strategy has to be maritime also. If you can’t afford to perform current operations very well, that fact should not suffice as an excuse for performing poorly. The solution lies primarily in a change in policy, and just possibly in a change in strategy. Because the future is not foreseeable in detail, we have to invest in the kind of military power that covers as much of the future threat spectrum to our vital interests as we can afford, prudently. And the master framework for British security thinking should be maritime, in its plain Corbettian meaning.