The Royal Navy: Britain's Trident for a Global Agenda Document

By James Hope and James Rogers, 4th September 2006

Britannia, with her shield and trident, is the very symbol, not only of the Royal Navy, but also of British global power. In the last instance, the Royal Navy is the United KingdomŠs greatest strategic asset and instrument. As the only other 'blue-water' navy other than those of France and the United States, its ballistic missile submarines carry the nation's nuclear deterrent and its aircraft carriers and escorting naval squadrons supply London with a deep oceanic power projection capability, which enables Britain to maintain a 'forward presence' globally, and the ability to influence events tactically throughout the world. This 'forward presence' keeps the oceans open and facilitates the flow of global trade. It also allows weaker partners and allies to shelter under Britain's naval umbrella. Ultimately, the fleet provides Britain with an outer perimeter of systemic defence so that conflicts can be kept far from home. Without a strong navy, Britain's global influence would be very much reduced, and its interests and values progressively undermined.

Britain's ability to project naval power in distant waters has been crucial to its foreign and defence strategy for centuries. At first, this was accomplished by wooden Men-O-War, which were followed by ironclads, then Dreadnoughts, and today, by the aircraft carrier and its escorting naval squadron. Since the end of the Second World War, the deployment of aircraft carriers to the Falklands in 1982, to Bosnia and Kosovo in 1995 and 1999, Sierra Leone in 2000, and to Afghanistan in 2001 and the Persian Gulf in both 1991 and 2003, has confirmed again and again that British overseas involvement would be impossible or greatly reduced without this unique capability. The aircraft carrier is and will remain the armed forces' backbone. Currently, the Royal Navy holds three such vessels, but these remain smaller in comparison with the supercarriers operated by the United States. In reality, they are relics - although since upgraded - of the Cold War era. But this situation is not to last much longer, for the Ministry of Defence has underway a naval programme to replace these three smaller vessels with two new supercarriers of its own. Britain's current 'Invincible' class aircraft carriers weigh approximately twenty-two thousand tonnes and carry an air-wing of twenty-two aircraft, including both 'jump-jet' 'Harrier' strike-fighters and an assortment of helicopters for reconnaissance and air-to-surface attack. The new aircraft carriers will be three times bigger, weighing approximately sixty-five thousand tonnes, and equipped with over fifty aircraft, forty of which will be the new Anglo-American 'Lightning' strike-fighters. One such vessel will provide more firepower than Britain's combined fleet of current aircraft carriers and will be more potent than the majority of the world's national air forces, meaning that these vessels will be the most powerful warships ever built by a European country.

The new aircraft carriers will reconfirm the Royal Navy's position as the second strongest naval force in the world, well into the distant future. They will also enable the government to continue to influence events a long distance from home waters. But while the aircraft carrier is the fleetŠs backbone, a navy cannot operate effectively without ancillary vessels at the cutting edge of naval design. As such, a series of projects to modernise, re-equip and rebuild the fleet, with a view to bringing its capabilities firmly into the twenty-first century, is now well underway. This will complete the Royal Navy's transition from primarily a North Atlantic focused, anti-submarine force, into a true 'blue water' navy, able to project overwhelming power in the service of British foreign and defence policy all over the world. A more capable fleet will also contribute to European Union global clout, while enabling London to influence and shape the emerging strategic policy

of the European Union.

Chief among the naval development programme is the building of a new class of nuclear attack submarines, called the 'Astute' class, which will have a capability to fire volleys of cruise missiles, with great precision, deep into any potential adversary's territory. As such, the modern nuclear attack submarine plays a similar role to the aircraft carrier, as a primary attack platform, readily deployable to trouble spots across the world. But also important are the escort warships, like Destroyers and Frigates, and BritainŠs elderly flotilla of 'Type 42' Destroyers is currently being replaced by the 'Type 45', the first of which, HMS Daring, was launched in February 2006. The 'Type 45' will, once complete, be the most advanced and powerful Destroyer ever built, and will provide perimeter and aerial defence for the new aircraft carriers and escorting naval squadrons, of which it will form a major component. Its revolutionary new missile system, called the Principal Air Attack Missile System, or PAAMS for short, is capable of shooting down any object the size of a grapefruit flying at three times the speed of sound within a two-hundred kilometre radius of the ship. Furthermore, PAAMS can engage multiple targets simultaneously, launching a barrage of surface-to-air missiles if required to neutralise an enemy saturation attack. Once complete, just one 'Type 45' will provide more firepower than the combined flotilla of the navy's current 'Type 42' Destroyers.

But no 'blue-water' fleet is complete without a coastal assault capacity, and the Royal Navy is no exception. Here, the fleet's ability to project significant ground forces onto the land has also been upgraded in recent years. The addition of the navy's first modern helicopter carrier, HMS Ocean, facilitates the movement of expeditionary forces into hostile littoral regions, whose role it is to build a bridgehead and sanitise an area so that reinforcements can safely follow. Also vital are landing platform vessels, which actually land the main army on the ground, including the plethora of tanks, armoured personnel carriers and artillery needed for tactical support. The recent incorporation into the fleet of the new ships, HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, significantly upgrades the Royal Navy's ability to reinforce an initial landing on the ground and provide a conduit through which the army can move.

These capabilities are clearly needed. Since the end of the last decade, especially since the Labour Party's electoral victory in 1997, Britain's global military deployments have increased dramatically, under the mantel of an 'active' and 'liberal interventionist' foreign policy. Although the Cold War's end, it was hoped, would provide a 'peace dividend', consecutive crises and humanitarian catastrophes showed that this was not to be the case. Naval power would remain as important - if not, more important - than anytime in modern history. Britain's global interests and commitments required, and continue to require, its constant naval presence throughout the globe. Indeed, the importance of the navy is seminal to the entire debate on a 'liberal interventionist' foreign policy and the views of the individuals elected to public office. Whilst Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's Labour Party clearly holds 'liberal interventionist' views on foreign policy, David Cameron's modern Conservatives' views surrounding foreign policy are less prominent. It would be reasonable to assume, however, that a Conservative foreign policy agenda would embrace a common theme to that of the United States, as has been the case in the past. Further, the views of several of Mr. Cameron's leading advisors and supporters are staunchly 'liberal interventionist' and some are even self-proclaimed neoconservatives.

But the need for naval power will not only be driven by the views of British statesmen and strategists, for, increasingly so, Britain and at allies are involved in conflicts to uphold and protect the nationŠs interests and values. From fighting drugs-runners in the Caribbean, to mopping-up pirates off Somalia's coast, Britain has to be globally committed. Often, this means that Britain and its allies must operate on distant frontiers, where regional partners are few. Here, an enhanced aircraft carrier naval squadron will enable power projection far deeper, unilaterally if necessary, thus avoiding the need to involve other regional actors or the need to play 'tit for tat' diplomacy, as has been necessary in the past to achieve the desired

strategic outcome. Boasting an enlarged capacity and improved capability, such modernised naval fleets will provide all the required space and infrastructure to facilitate a military campaign, and importantly the capability of deploying ground forces on a massive scale, essential should the removal of further rogue regimes become necessary. Aircraft carriers invalidate the need for border access through neighbouring countries or having to operate offensive aircraft from foreign aerodromes, offering military planners a wider range of tactical options, in which the navy will assume a central role. And, through avoiding the involvement of other regional actors, diplomatic relations need not be strained when foreign governments must be coerced into providing the support for a cause that they believe may have destabilising effects, nationally or regionally.

The navy's contribution to peace-enforcement campaigns, such as those in Kosovo, Sierra Leone and East Timor, will continue to be vital. The Royal Marines have found a niche alongside the British Army as an elite commando, rapid-reaction force, and their recent deployments are testament to this. The Marines are an amphibious force, meaning that their ability to conduct coastal assaults remains central to naval doctrine. After all, they are frequently the first forces to go into a hostile littoral area and conduct battle. But for the more drawn-out counter-insurgency campaigns such as Afghanistan, Somalia, and now Iraq, the navy's role is normally reduced to providing support, as well as a visible presence off the shore. Counter-insurgency campaigns, often requiring heavier armour and intensive intelligence collection, are ideally suited to the bigger units of the British Army who are better-equipped and trained for prolonged ground combat. But in its supporting role, particularly in the initial stages of a counter-insurgency campaign, the Royal Navy will be able to mobilise its strike aircraft at short notice and attack targets with precision guided munitions, as well as bombard the shore with the artillery located on its Frigates and Destroyers. Further, its reconnaissance helicopters provide the ability to collect information on enemy movements high up from the air. The navy's tactical versatility, therefore, is of considerable importance in the overall military picture and, in many respects, naval power itself is a tactical instrument to support strategic policy, essential for the projection of British power, its support and reinforcement.

The ability to deter or coerce is also critical, and the Royal Navy's fleets will continue to have an unmistakably physical and threatening presence when deployed overseas. When located outside a problematic country's territory, the very existence of an aircraft carrier or nuclear submarine, capable of firing cruise missiles, may be able to cajole autocratic regimes into abiding by the will of the international community, and/or that of Britain. Such a naval presence provides London - or, the European Union - with a modernised version of the 'gunboat diplomacy' of lore, a tactic which had its origins in the Victorian era, where such displays typically involved demonstrations of naval might to symbolise political will and determination. The mere sight of such power almost always had a considerable impact, and it was rarely necessary for such boats to use other measures, such as demonstrations of cannon fire.

Yet the most important and profound consequence of Britain's upgraded, twenty-first century fleet, is that foreign interventions will become more achievable. When necessary, Britain will be better equipped and able to act unilaterally, as it did in the Falklands War, or in the Sierra Leone intervention, when rebels were set on slaughtering the people of Freetown. But also, a powerful navy will provide Britain with unprecedented influence in the evolving strategic culture of the European Union. Britain and France already cooperate on a whole range of military issues, and France will work with Britain to build its next aircraft carrier, by using British designs. A powerful European defence capability is in Britain's interests, as it will provide a greater pool of resources from which to draw, reducing the burden on British financial, political and military expenditure. Further, a European defence capability will strengthen the European and American relationship, reducing European dependency on the United States, and increasing Brussels' ability not only to act in the wider world, but also to bringing credible military assets to the table when working with Washing-

ton. Equally, a greater European role in defence will re-energise the European military-industrial base, leading to better technological innovation. Finally, and perhaps, most importantly, a strong Europe will reduce the feeling of weakness on the part of the Europeans, which sometimes leads to cloudy judgements, wishful thinking, and complacency, especially on the part of those European states that are less capable militarily.

Given Britain's global interests, its worldwide commitments, its leading strategic role as part of the European Union, as well as its alliance with the United States, and its values-driven foreign policy, a 'blue-water' navy will indeed continue to have a role to play in both peacetime and war. The Royal Navy's deep oceanic power projection capability means that its aircraft carriers will remain the backbone of the surface fleet well into the distant future. Accordingly, it is essential for Britain to maintain, and reinforce further, its abilities to project power throughout the globe. A regained naval capability will also give Britain increasing confidence to act unilaterally in pursuit of its foreign policy goals, and fulfil a space of its own, at least until the European Union fields credible armed forces to which Britain can help lead and contribute. Thus, the political ground is changing, and Britain's growing 'blue water' fleet will offer a wider range of options to policy-makers, such as a preventative, pre-emptive and humanitarian interventions, against any peripheral rogue state, breakdown of the rule of law, or act of ethnic cleaning or genocide. It is therefore essential that the government continues to provide all the necessary resources so that the Royal Navy's global power is maintained and, wherever possible, reinforced. In short, the government must adopt a Second Power Standard and maintain permanently the Royal Navy's position as the world's second strongest fleet.