

SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT

- Eight years after emerging apparently victorious from the 1998 *Strategic Defence Review*, the Royal Navy is bloodied, battered and on the ropes.
- An initial sacrifice of three frigates and two submarines has turned into the devastating loss of 14 major frontline vessels – with a prospect of even more being run down or mothballed.
- There is a serious prospect of 19 destroyers and frigates having to do the work of 30.
- These reckless reductions have been based on the strategic falsehood – the ‘Hoon Excuse’ – that numbers no longer matter in an era of more capable ships.
- The reluctant acquiescence of the Admirals has been bought by the promise – as yet unfulfilled – that two Future Aircraft Carriers will be ordered. In the meantime, their target in-service dates of 2012 and 2015 have been abandoned in all but name.
- Having admitted that the Armed Forces are involved in more complex and more numerous operations than were anticipated in the *Strategic Defence Review*, the Government have betrayed the Royal Navy by inflicting massive damage to the front line instead of augmenting it.
- The next step in this betrayal is a threat to close one of the United Kingdom’s only three Naval Bases.
- The Type 45 destroyer-building programme has been slashed from 12 to eight; only six of these have been ordered; and none is to be fitted with the Tomahawk land-attack cruise missiles requested by the Naval Staff.
- The final size of the future submarine fleet is uncertain, but seems likely to consist of only eight, or for a period just seven, boats – apart from those carrying the nuclear deterrent.
- This whole sorry saga has provoked a level of concern at the top of the Service unprecedented since the East of Suez controversy in the 1960s, and has led to a degree of public criticism by the former First Sea Lord which it would be perilous to ignore.

THE SDR BLUEPRINT

In July 1998, the *Strategic Defence Review* promised the replacement of “our current carriers from around 2012 by two larger, more versatile carriers capable of carrying a more powerful force”. On the other hand, it was decided to reduce the number of attack submarines “over the next few years from 12 to 10” and the destroyer and frigate fleet from 35 to 32. It was also decided that “22 modern *Sandown* and *Hunt* class mine-hunters will be sufficient rather than 25 as previously planned” (*paras. 115-6*). The then First Sea Lord reluctantly accepted these reductions, given the promise of new carriers.

In a supporting essay to the *Review*, it was concluded that “the ability to deploy offensive air power will be central to future force projection operations. But we cannot be certain that we will always have access to suitable air bases” (*Essay six, para. 26*). Therefore, the two proposed new carriers would constitute a seaborne base from which a combined force of RN and RAF aircraft would be able to operate.

The reduction in the destroyer and frigate total to 32 was based on the numbers needed for “two concurrent medium scale deployments, which is the most demanding requirement for the destroyer and frigate force”; and the loss of two boats from the 12-strong attack submarine force was excused on the basis that:

“All ten attack submarines will, however, be equipped to fire Tomahawk land attack missiles to increase their utility in force projection operations (this compares with previous plans to fit only seven submarines for the Tomahawk system) ... This rebalancing will be matched by adjustments to peacetime tasks where necessary to ensure that overstretch is addressed. At the same time, we will take action to remedy longstanding undermanning within the Royal Navy. In the first instance, most personnel released by the changes set out above will be redeployed across the Service to ameliorate current shortfalls. Once manpower problems have been solved the net effect of the Review on the Navy’s Regular manpower requirement will be a reduction of some 1,400.” (*Essay six, paras. 24-5*)

THE HOON EXCUSE

In December 1999, a Defence White Paper duly noted that the Type 22 frigates *HMS Boxer*, *HMS Beaver* and *HMS London* had been paid off – after only 16, 15 and 12 years’ service – and that the submarines *HMS Splendid* and *HMS Spartan* would follow suit in 2003 and 2006 respectively. Subsequently, the destroyer and frigate force was quietly cut from 32 to 31, on the grounds that the greater power and time at sea of the remaining vessels would compensate for the extra ship which had been lost.

This devious technique was elevated into a doctrine by the Secretary of State, Geoff Hoon, in a lecture at the Royal United Services Institute on 26 June 2003. He concluded that “advances in technology” and “the astonishing speed with which we can increasingly operate” meant that:

“Measuring the capability of our Armed Forces by the number of units or platforms in their possession will no longer be significant”. (*RUSI Journal, August 2003*)

THE PLAN ABANDONED

In December 2003, another Defence White Paper – entitled “*Delivering Security in a Changing World*” – again stressed the role of the Royal Navy in projecting force “from the sea onto the land”. It predicted that:

“The introduction of the two new aircraft carriers with the Joint Combat Aircraft early in the next decade will offer a step increase in our ability to project air power from the sea. The Type 45 destroyer will enhance protection of joint and maritime forces and assist force projection.”

However, a hint of what was to come was clearly visible:

“Some of our older vessels contribute less well to the pattern of operations that we envisage, and reductions in their numbers will be necessary.” (*Cm 6041-1, para. 4.10*)

A supporting essay to this White Paper – entitled “*Scales of Effort and Military Tasks*” – conceded that:

“Since SDR our Armed Forces have conducted operations that have been more complex and greater in number than we had envisaged. *We have effectively been conducting*

continual concurrent operations, deploying further afield, to more places, more frequently and with a greater variety of missions than set out in the SDR planning assumptions. We expect to see a similar pattern of operations in the future, with the emphasis on multiple, concurrent Medium and Small Scale deployments. A major lesson of the last five years is that the Department and the Armed Forces as a whole have to be structured and organised to support a fairly high level of operational activity at all times, not as a regular interruption to preparing for a Large Scale conflict. (Cm 6041-II, para. 2.9)

... Building on the methodologies used during SDR New Chapter, we now divide military capability into six key capability elements: Maritime, Land, Air, C4ISR, Special Forces (SF) and Logistics. (Cm 6041-II, para. 2.11)

... Our analysis suggests that in some respects – particularly for enabling assets such as deployable HQs, communications and deployed logistical support – *several Small Scale operations are potentially more demanding than one or two more substantial operations.* This is particularly the case if they are in locations that are geographically remote from each other and the UK. Given the signs that multiple concurrent smaller operations are becoming the norm, our concurrency and endurance assumptions need to focus on each of the six capability elements to ensure that our force structures can cope with this pattern.” (Cm 6041-II, para. 2.12)

THE AXE FALLS

Despite the White Paper’s admission that operations had been more numerous and varied than the SDR had expected, on 21 July 2004 a Supplement to the White Paper was published, slashing the size of the Fleet. Once again, the praises were sung of the yet-to-be-ordered future carriers and Joint Combat Aircraft, as well as the new assault ships, *HMS Albion* and *HMS Bulwark*, and the forthcoming *Bay* class landing ships. It was then argued that:

“In the light of the reduced conventional threat, our revised concurrency assumptions and improved networked capability, we assess that we need fewer ... platforms. Consequently we have a requirement for 8 Type 45 destroyers and will need 25 destroyers and frigates overall ... We judge in the light of the reduced threat that an attack submarine fleet of 8 SSNs will be sufficient to meet the full range of tasks.” (Cm 6269, paras. 2.6-7)

The Nimrod MR2, with a less important anti-submarine role, could be reduced from a total of 21 to only 16 – and, because of the anticipated “greater range and endurance” of the future MRA4 aircraft, only “about 12” of these would be required to replace the current Nimrods in their surveillance role. As for the mine counter-measures fleet, the total of 22 set out in the SDR would now be cut to just 16. (Cm 6269, paras. 2.8-9)

THE STORY SO FAR

The logic of the Government’s treatment of the Royal Navy up to this point runs as follows: all the Armed Forces were scaled down at the end of the Cold War, but adjustments were needed to reflect the strategic shift from a defensive role in Europe to the mounting of far-flung operations from a sea base. This required large strike carriers as its centrepiece and a loss of five frigates and submarines was a price apparently worth paying in 1998.

However, instead of being reduced from 35 to 32, the frigate and destroyer force has been slashed from 35 to 25. Instead of being reduced from 12 to 10, the submarine force is being slashed from 12 to a maximum of eight. The carriers – one of which was supposed to be in service by 2012 – have not yet been firmly ordered, and no target in-service dates are now given by the Government, despite its previous willingness to do so. The 12 Type 45 destroyers which were projected, and which have a key role in the air defence of the sea base, have been reduced to a programme of eight; but only six of these have been ordered and ships seven and eight may never be built.

Such massive reductions might have been expected if events since the publication of the *Strategic Defence Review* in July 1998 had shown it to be over-pessimistic in estimating the future threats to our country and its interests. **Yet, the opposite is the case: as was admitted in the December 2003 White Paper, the number and variety of operational deployments exceeded the assumptions of the SDR.** What has the Government's response been? It has been drastically to weaken the Royal Navy by reducing the total of its major warships whilst disingenuously arguing that their replacements need be fewer in number because each of them will be more powerful than its predecessor.

Such an argument is wholly untenable, given that the capability of the new generation destroyers, submarines and surveillance aircraft was perfectly well known when the original totals required were agreed in the SDR in 1998 – before the Kosovo campaign, before 11 September, before the invasion of Afghanistan and before the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. In the case of the Type 45 destroyers, in particular, not only may the total be as low as half-a-dozen, but the repeated requests of the Royal Navy for these to be fitted with Tomahawk land attack cruise missiles have been flatly refused by the Government.

THE VERDICT OF THE SERVICE CHIEFS

There is only one rationale for the devastation brought by the Government to the size of the Royal Navy: money. The First Sea Lord at the time of the 2004 cuts was Admiral Sir Alan West. In 2003, he told the magazine *Warships International Fleet Review* that “no matter how good a ship is, it can only be in so many places at any one time” – a specific rebuttal of the Hoon argument that the number of “units or platforms” would no longer be significant in measuring the capability of the Armed Forces. Admiral West also pointed out that: “you need a lot of Type 45s to give the same coverage as a naval air-defence fighter” – a reference to the calculated risk taken in phasing out the FA2 Sea Harriers six years before the Joint Combat Aircraft was expected to come into service on the first of the new carriers in 2012.

After the cuts were announced in July, the First Sea Lord was interviewed by Navy specialist Richard Scott in the September/October 2004 edition of *Warship World* magazine. Referring to the decision to dispose of three Type 42 destroyers (*HMS Cardiff*, *HMS Newcastle* and *HMS Glasgow*, after 25 years' service each) and three Type 23 frigates (*HMS Norfolk*, *HMS Marlborough* and *HMS Grafton*, after only 15, 14 and 9 years' service respectively), he stated:

“My gut feeling is that we need a DD/FF force of about 30 ships ... I would still much rather not be losing those three Type 23s. It is a painful cut, and I believe we are taking a risk. We shouldn't delude ourselves.”

The fact that attack submarines no longer had much of an anti-submarine role was no excuse for cutting their numbers to only eight:

“they have far wider utility in land attack, covert intelligence gathering and special forces operations, not to mention their tremendous capacity for sea denial.”

Referring to the Type 45s, he added:

“To put Tactical Tomahawk in a Type 45 destroyer requires a relatively insignificant amount of money, and exploits the virtues of a platform you’ve already paid for. The problem is there is no money. I had hoped, I have to say, that we might have had a nod in that direction. But we haven’t, and it will have to fight its way through the equipment programme in the normal way.”

The proof that these were Treasury-imposed cuts came with his closing remarks:

“Given the pot of gold we’ve got, I consider the adjustments we’ve made are probably the right ones. It would be very nice if this country felt it could spend more on defence – and if it did, I would argue we need more destroyers and frigates. What people do need to be aware of is that there is a risk with these reductions ... my concern overall is that we are taking risk on risk.”

Warming to this theme, in a separate interview given to the shipping paper *Lloyds List* (5 August 2004) while aboard the doomed 9 year-old *HMS Grafton* at Gibraltar’s 300th Anniversary celebrations, Admiral West warned that seaborne terrorism could cripple global trade and revealed that there had been intelligence indications of al-Qa’eda plans to blow up ships as they sail through maritime ‘choke points’.

At the same time as the First Sea Lord was expressing his dismay, his Commander-in-Chief Fleet, Admiral Jonathon Band, was warning the Government

“that he was prepared to accept the cuts only in return for a firm pledge that promised new aircraft carriers, destroyers and submarines would arrive ... Admiral Band said ... ‘I have told the Secretary of State that we have accepted lean today for jam tomorrow and, providing that what we are promised is coming, deal on.’ ” (Daily Telegraph, 5 September 2004)

Admiral West continued to spell out his concerns both up to and after his retirement. At the beginning of 2006 he drew an unfavourable comparison between the 65 destroyers and frigates available at the time of the Falklands War and the 25 available now:

“Whenever the UK has got to the stage when it is spending too little on defence, the nation has suffered, due to some unforeseen event not long afterwards ... Maybe I’m just a silly old bastard but I’ve got 41 years experience of these things and I can tell you we need 30 destroyers and frigates for what the Government wants us to do” (Sunday Telegraph, 15 January 2006).

On the day he retired – to be succeeded by Admiral Band – he declared:

“The resources, bearing in mind inflation and other things, don’t allow us to do the things we need to do. Over time, we won’t have the forces available should there suddenly be a strategic shock – and by strategic shock I mean something like the Falklands, which is the classic example ... The security and wealth of this country depend on the sea and the Navy. If you let things run too far down, you put that security in jeopardy. On a day-to-day basis around the world, we are very stretched” (Daily Mail, 8 February 2006).

THE CRISIS DEEPENS

The following month, it was reported that the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee had found that:

“about a third of the Armed Forces were not ready to go war, with the situation facing the Navy being of particular concern ... The report followed a study by the National Audit Office [in 2005], which found that less than 60% of the Fleet was now in a good state of readiness – down from more than 90% five years ago. The cuts have led to 24 Naval ships being placed on ‘reduced support status’, where even basic maintenance will only be carried out in response to urgent problems. They have also seen a sixfold increase in the practice of ‘cannibalisation’, in which ships are stripped of vital components, such as sonar equipment and missile systems, to keep others in operation ... the Report revealed that the Ministry of Defence had been forced to throw the Navy a £50m lifeline to allow it to meet its operational commitments” (*Western Morning News, 3 March 2006*).

When, in the autumn, it appeared that the Royal Navy might be needed to contribute to a United Nations blockade of nuclear North Korea, a senior officer was quoted describing himself as “staggered” that the British Government should contemplate a United Kingdom contribution, particularly following the withdrawal of the Sea Harriers and the absence of any adequate air defence capability in advance of the arrival of the first Type 45 destroyer: “Without the Sea Harrier we are screwed and we cannot really protect ourselves adequately from the missile threat”, the officer reportedly remarked (*Daily Telegraph, 16 October 2006*).

Having devastated the size of the Fleet, it was only to be expected that the Government would then turn its attention to the infrastructure which supports it. Consequently, a Review of the three existing Naval Bases – Devonport, Portsmouth and Faslane – has begun, generating widespread fear that either Devonport or Portsmouth will be closed. The strategic folly of forcing the Royal Navy to depend on a single South Coast Naval Base is too obvious to require elucidation. Yet, that is what some naval staff officers are contemplating if the alternative is to lose even more warships from the frontline Fleet. In a debate in Westminster Hall on 5 December 2006, junior Defence Minister Derek Twigg stated that:

“We also need to look at our support capacity at the naval bases, to ensure that it is matched appropriately to the future needs of the Royal Navy. We need to ensure that every penny counts and that resources are rightly focused on the front line. We must not lose sight of the fact that the number of ships requiring maintenance and repair has been steadily reducing.” (*Hansard, col. 73 WH*)

He was challenged that this situation was simply a result of the Government’s decision to slash the size of the Fleet but, though promising to return to this point later in his speech, he did not do so.

Worse was to follow when, only three days later, a tabloid newspaper reported that, under a plan to help pay for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, a further six destroyers and frigates “would be tied up in harbour on a ‘reduced state of readiness’ leaving just 19 fully-operational escort ships”, compared with the 55 destroyers and frigates in the Japanese Navy. Far from denying that this was under consideration, a Ministry of Defence source was quoted as saying: “Just because a proposal is looked at by officials does not mean that it will be implemented.” (*Sun, 8 December 2006*)

THE CARRIER 'INCENTIVE'

It thus now appears that the Royal Navy is threatened not just with a choice between losing more warships and closing a major base, but quite possibly with the loss of both. How much longer will this process be allowed to continue, on the back of the promise – yet to be carried out – of a firm order for two Future Aircraft Carriers? And how secure is the carrier project itself?

According to former First Sea Lord Sir Alan West, who had ring-fenced £3.5 billion for their construction costs:

“The carrier programme is the jewel in the crown of the Strategic Defence Review. Yet there are officials within the MoD who are casting lascivious looks at it. There is no doubt that the rats are out there having a nibble. If Britain wants to remain a world power and to operate with a deal of freedom around the world, these two carriers are vital.”

In his view, the country is in danger of sacrificing long-term investment in properly balanced Armed Forces – behaving instead like “tin-pot countries” which exhaust their defence budgets on running rather than developing the Services. Abandoning major equipment programmes because of short-term campaign pressures ignores the fact that, a decade from now, the UK could be facing threats

“far more dangerous than terrorism in Central Asia ... All we could be left with is an Armed Forces that is effectively a gendarmerie. And I suppose we would retire to our island and hope that no one gets to us” (*Sunday Telegraph, 24 December 2006*).

When one considers the catalogue of cuts inflicted on the Royal Navy – first, five major warships; then, a sixth; then, eight more; and, now, the threat of yet another half-dozen – with the incentive of the two giant carriers used to buy compliance at every stage, the feeling of betrayal at the top of the Service is palpable. If, after all this pain and humiliation, one or both of the carriers fails to be ordered, that feeling of betrayal will rightly become absolute.

POSTSCRIPT: The Looming Disaster

On 31 December 2006, two days after the paper above was completed, the *Sunday Times* reported that six more destroyers and frigates were indeed “expected to be put into reduced readiness, known as mothballing, to achieve urgent savings of more than £250m”, and that the seventh and eighth Type-45 destroyers would be cancelled. On 5 January, the doomed vessels were identified as the Type-22 frigates *Cornwall*, *Cumberland*, *Campbeltown* and *Chatham*, and the Type-42 destroyers *Exeter* and *Southampton*. Two mine counter-measures vessels and two Royal Fleet Auxiliary tankers were also said to be “under threat” (*Daily Telegraph, 5 January 2007*).

The Ministry of Defence was quoted as claiming that it had no plans to cut the destroyer and frigate fleet – but the steady stream of stories continued unabated. The day after a lunchtime discussion between Sir Jonathon Band and Defence Correspondents, held on 16 February, the headline writers were in their element:

“FIRST SEA LORD DECLARES ALL-OUT WAR ON NAVY CUTS” (*Daily Telegraph*),

“WE NEED £1 BILLION TO RULE THE WAVES, SAYS FIRST SEA LORD” (*The Times*),

“NAVY NEEDS HUGE BUDGET HIKE TO DO ITS JOB” (*Guardian*) and

“BRITAIN HEADING FOR A NAVY THE SIZE OF BELGIUM’S” (*Daily Mail*).

According to the *Guardian* (17 February 2007), Sir Jonathon had said that there would come a point when the Armed Forces could no longer cope with the demands placed on them: "We could turn into the Belgian Navy, and if we do, I'm gone". He also suggested that he might resign if the aircraft carriers were cancelled. However, a hastily-issued press statement on the same day as the lunch sought to calm the media frenzy: "I do not think, and have not said that the Royal Navy needs a £1bn-a-year extra to do its job or to keep ships at sea ... I welcome the Government's commitment to the new aircraft carriers, and my comments today have been aimed at informing this public debate about the long-term funding of our Armed Forces, nothing more."

This 'clarification' also referred to "the delivery of 28 new ships in the last decade alone" – a claim which has become something of a Government mantra in present troubled times. What really matters, however, is not the number of warships which have been *delivered* in the recent past, but the numbers which are being *ordered* now for the future Fleet. An examination of the Labour Government's record shows the grand total of warships ordered in the last five years to have been a single, solitary offshore patrol vessel, *HMS Clyde*.

In a special Commons debate on 26 February, the Conservatives pointed out that, in the entire decade of Labour Government rule, only 16 warships had been ordered – six Type-45 destroyers (instead of the proposed 12), four Bay-class landing ships, four offshore patrol vessels and two survey ships. By contrast, in the last eight years alone of the previous Conservative Government, 27 warships had been ordered – two ballistic missile submarines, three attack submarines, the helicopter carrier *HMS Ocean* (the largest ship in the Fleet), the assault ships *Albion* and *Bulwark*, nine frigates, seven mine-hunters, two oilers and a survey ship.

Nor is the Royal Navy suffering in isolation. "I do not remember the concerns of the military being so great since the last days of the Callaghan government," Tony Blair's first Chief of Defence Staff, Lord Guthrie, stated on 20 February. It is hardly surprising that he regards the Heads of the Services as being "at the end of their tether" over funding. Since 2001, the United Kingdom has embarked on high-intensity military operations with our defence budget languishing at a lower percentage of GDP (2.2%) than at any time since the disastrous era between the two world wars. Typically, the Prime Minister has claimed the figure to have stayed "constant at roughly around 2.5% of GDP" since 1997, "If we add in the extra funding for Iraq and Afghanistan" (*Speech aboard HMS Albion, Devonport, 12 January 2007*).

Presumably, the extra costs of going to war are now to be requisitioned from the peace-time defence budget – formalising the Government's practice of increasing military commitments whilst reducing resources in relative terms. Thus are the infrastructure and front line of the Royal Navy being sacrificed to finance the waging of current campaigns – an act of folly which future generations will bitterly regret.