

# The UK as a Medium Maritime Power in the 21st Century

Christopher Martin

# The UK as a Medium Maritime Power in the 21st Century

Logistics for Influence

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Christopher Martin  
School of Law and Politics  
University of Hull Law and Politics  
Hull, UK

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## PREFACE

Less than a century ago there was huge public awareness of the importance of the Royal Navy. The navy was the first line of defence from invasion and protected the empire and the trade upon which British wealth and security depended. Children collected cards of naval heroes much like children today collect stickers of football stars. The Royal Navy was, then at least, synonymous in the public mind with defence and prosperity. Today, despite the UK's deep dependency upon the globalised maritime-based trading system, the general public is almost completely 'sea-blind'. Few understand what the Royal Navy does. One might also ask if many policy-makers really understand too.

From its days of naval supremacy, by 1990 the Royal Navy had been reduced to little more than an anti-submarine warfare force. Following the SDR98 the Royal Navy appeared to have been granted a new life and the focus was shifted to power projection. Nevertheless, the numbers of ships continued to dwindle with the Royal Navy obtaining ever fewer but more expensive warships centred on its core power projection role. The massive reduction in numbers from those planned under SDR98 and the questions that persisted about whether the Royal Navy would acquire two, one or none of the *Queen Elizabeth* class aircraft carriers is a strong indicator that the role of the Royal Navy post-Cold War is yet undecided, at least in the minds of policy-makers.

In the public imagination, the focus is always upon warships and for those who take an interest the dwindling numbers are a matter of concern. However, a far more insidious attack on the capability of the Royal Navy has been taking place and that is the precipitous reduction in the number

of Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels that support the fleet. The effect of the decline in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary is little understood and discussed. The Royal Fleet Auxiliary hardly makes the headlines, except perhaps when its ships are substituting for warships, which is an increasingly common occurrence given the lack of warships. However, it is the Royal Fleet Auxiliary that keeps the Royal Navy on station, and without a full afloat support logistics capability, the ability of the Royal Navy to conduct operations autonomously, at distance for extended periods is severely curtailed.

This study will argue that the present structure of the Royal Navy is unsuitable for the coming century. The Royal Navy is too small and too focused on a warfighting capability and that the reduction in Royal Fleet Auxiliary numbers and capability is a fundamentally flawed policy. It will argue that the decisions that have led to this situation are because of a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of policy-makers of the relationship between policy, strategy and logistics. It will argue that strategy and logistics are directed to one objective, control: control of the opponent and control of the situation. It will also argue that the theoretical premise upon which naval operations at distance have been conceived, namely, Boulding's Loss of Strength Gradient, is flawed for naval operations and instead postulates a new theoretical concept, a Loss of Time Gradient. It is the Loss of Time Gradient that explains the crucial requirement for both sufficiency in force size and afloat support logistics. It argues that naval operations are not governed by factors of distance but by factors of time. Only by understanding this concept can the fullest capability of naval forces be attained.

For a state like the UK, naval forces of sufficient capability and scale will be indispensable in the maritime twenty-first century should the UK wish to have control over events that will affect its globalised economic interests. Should the UK fail to meet this challenge then other states will and this will leave the UK reliant on the beneficence of others. This is a risk the UK cannot take.

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS/ACRONYMS

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| AAW            | Anti-Air Warfare                                       |
| ASW            | Anti-Submarine Warfare                                 |
| BMD4           | British Maritime Doctrine, 4th Edition                 |
| Co             | Coastal/Patrol Craft                                   |
| COMRFA         | Commodore Royal Fleet Auxiliary                        |
| CV             | Aircraft Carrier                                       |
| CVH            | Helicopter Carrier                                     |
| DD             | Destroyer  |
| DSTL           | Defence Science Technology Laboratory                  |
| EEZ            | Exclusive Economic Zone                                |
| FF             | Frigate  |
| FF2020         | Future Force 2020                                      |
| FLD            | Full Load Displacement                                 |
| HK             | Hunter-Killer  |
| IEA            | International Energy Agency                            |
| JMDF           | Japanese Maritime Defence Forces                       |
| LSG            | Loss of Strength Gradient                              |
| LST            | Loss of Time Gradient                                  |
| MARS Programme | Military Afloat Reach Sustainability Programme         |
| MCM            | Mine Counter Measures                                  |
| MOD            | UK Ministry of Defence                                 |
| MSCC           | Marine Science Co-ordination Committee                 |
| MSO            | Maritime Stabilisation Operations                      |
| MW             | Mine Warfare   |
| NATO           | North Atlantic Treaty Organisation                     |
| OECD           | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| RAN         | Royal Australian Navy                                   |
| RCN         | Royal Canadian Navy                                     |
| RUSI        | Royal United Services Institution                       |
| SDR98       | Strategic Defence Review 1998                           |
| SDSR10      | Strategic Defence and Security Review 2010              |
| SDSR15      | Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015              |
| SISR        | Strategic Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance |
| SOLAS       | Safety of Life at Sea                                   |
| SS          | Diesel-electric submarine                               |
| SSBN        | Nuclear powered ballistic-missile carrying submarine    |
| SSN         | Nuclear powered submarine                               |
| STUFT       | Ships Taken Up from Trade                               |
| TLAM        | Tomahawk Land Attack Missile                            |
| UNCTAD      | United Nations Conference on Trade and Development      |
| USN         | United States Navy                                      |
| UUI fishing | Unreported, Unregulated, Illegal fishing                |
| WTO         | World Trade Organisation                                |

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