



Why Britain needs a larger navy

By William Freer and James Rogers

‘Was I to die at this moment, “want of frigates!” would be stamped on my heart.’ Those are the words of Adm. Horatio Nelson in 1798, as he sought to pursue surviving French forces after victory in the Battle of the Nile.¹ Back then, the Royal Navy was, by some margin, the most powerful force on Earth, but it was not omnipotent – even Britain’s greatest admiral knew it had limitations. Today, a powerful perception of maritime decline, fanned on by Russian and Chinese discursive statecraft, has set in.² With the press reporting that two additional frigates will soon be struck from the fleet, the impression of British naval decline will hardly be challenged.³

But perceptions can be deceiving: for starters, unlike Nelson’s Men-O’-War or the Grand Fleet’s mighty Dreadnoughts, the modern Royal Navy with its ballistic missile firing submarines deter aggression insofar as they can annihilate any foreign invasion force. And on some measures, the Royal Navy is growing in strength, having recently received the largest and most powerful vessels in its history – the 65,000 tonne Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers.

¹ Horatio Nelson, ‘Letter to Earl Spencer: “Mouth of the Nile, 9th August 1798”’, *The Dispatches and Letters of Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Nelson, 3rd Volume, January 1798-August 1799* (London: Henry Colburn, 1845), p. 98.

² For example, see: Wu Dongxu, ‘Showing off its tier-2 naval power, Britain can hardly affect regional affairs in Asia’, *Global Times*, 26/08/2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

³ Danielle Sheridan, ‘Navy has so few sailors it has to decommission ships’, *Daily Telegraph*, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/> (checked: 15/01/2024).



Indeed, total displacement is growing, from over 700,000 tonnes in 2000 to over 830,000 tonnes in 2023, making the Royal Navy by far the largest European navy in terms of displacement, and arguably the most capable geared for force projection after the United States (US) Navy.⁴

Today's Royal Navy is largely a product of the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, which foresaw a fleet geared towards worldwide force projection.⁵ This was a logical decision given the threats facing British interests after the Cold War. But subsequent governments, distracted by counterinsurgency campaigns and eager to cut defence spending, reduced the number of escorts, especially destroyers and frigates, leaving the navy considerably smaller than the 1998 review envisaged.

And since then, geopolitics has worsened, as identified in the recent Integrated Review and Integrated Review Refresh, as well as the associated defence command papers.⁶ From December 2023, the UK got a glimpse of this as Iranian-backed Houthis began to strike and disrupt container shipping in the Red Sea. But this is only scratching the surface. Significant state-based threats have also emerged in other theatres: the same month, Venezuela threatened Guyana – to which HMS Trent was dispatched to Georgetown as a deterrent. More significantly, Russia has become a revisionist foe in Euro-Atlantic waters, including those surrounding the British Isles, while the People's Republic of China's (PRC) fleet is growing at an astonishing rate in the Indo-Pacific.

This Primer makes the case for a larger navy, geared towards specific postures in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific, to meet these challenges. It begins by appraising the importance of the sea to British interests, before identifying how the Royal Navy's posture has changed since the mid-20th century. It then explains why the naval modernisation and rearmament programmes of Russia and the PRC compel the UK to invest in a more potent fleet – primarily in terms of more destroyers, frigates and submarines – but also innovative maritime catalysts to secure strategic advantage at sea and deter and, where necessary, defeat, increasingly well-equipped and determined adversaries.

⁴ Measuring naval power is a notoriously complex issue, with numerous variables, all of which are open to interpretation and have their own limitations: the displacement of major combatants (see: Annex 1) is used in this paper (except when stated as 'total' displacement) to highlight the comparative size of a navy, the hull numbers available to highlight the number of platforms (for example showing how dispersed a navy can be), and average hull size to highlight whether a navy is focused more on littoral or expeditionary maritime power.

⁵ 'Strategic Defence Review', Ministry of Defence, 07/1998, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

⁶ 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world', Cabinet Office, 13/03/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

Britain as a maritime power

The UK cannot ignore the sea. As an insular state, the sea is the foundation of British strength and the umbilical cord which links the British Isles to the rest of the world. Beneath the waves lie vital undersea cables and pipelines which carry 99% of internet traffic and over 77% of the UK's gas imports; and on the sea's surface is carried the trade crucial to national prosperity.⁷ The seas surrounding the British Isles are also home to a growing number of wind turbines, which currently produce almost 14% of Britain's electricity.⁸ The UK also holds sovereignty over 14 overseas territories, stretching from the South Atlantic to the Pacific oceans, three of which loom over key strategic chokepoints. In short, without a powerful navy, the UK would be a far less safe and influential country.

A navy, however, can be powerful in different ways, depending on geographic position, national strength, strategic objectives, and ambition (see: Box 1). Since at least 1805, HM Government has tasked the Royal Navy to command the ocean, ideally in conjunction with allies and partners. This required control over the seas surrounding the home islands, while modulating sea denial and sea control in more distant theatres, depending on their geostrategic significance and the extent of foreign opposition. When strong rivals adopted a robust sea denial posture (which tends to depend on a larger number of smaller vessels) closer to the British Isles – as the Soviet Navy did in the 1970s and 1980s – the Royal Navy shifted away from global operations. In response to the Soviet threat, the fleet was optimised for neutralising submarines in the North Atlantic; larger aircraft carriers and escorts gave way to numerous lighter frigates and carriers (i.e., the Invincible class).⁹

Box 1: Forms of Maritime posture¹⁰

- **Sea denial** results when a generally weaker navy develops capabilities to disrupt a stronger navy from operating with impunity. Even powerful navies can opt for

⁷ Louisa Brooke-Holland, 'Seabed Warfare: Protecting the UK's undersea infrastructure', House of Commons Library, 24/05/2023, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

⁸ 'UK energy in brief 2023', Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, 01/09/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

⁹ The Defence White Paper of 1981 planned further restructuring of the fleet towards anti-submarine operations, including the phasing out of the navy's carriers and amphibious forces. The Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands the following year scuppered the plans.

¹⁰ Informed by 'Joint Doctrine Publication 0-10: UK Maritime Power', Ministry of Defence, 18/10/2023, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/> (checked: 15/01/2024).



regional sea denial postures when facing competing geographical priorities; the Royal Navy, with pressing needs in the Euro-Atlantic theatre, pursued sea denial in the Pacific from 1941-1943.¹¹

- **Sea control** occurs where a generally stronger fleet establishes a persistent or even permanent maritime presence (locally, regionally, or even globally) to the extent that rival navies avoid confrontation. For much of the post-Trafalgar era, the Royal Navy has attempted to enact sea control in the North Atlantic, often by leading a coalition of allies and partners.
- **Command of the ocean** ensues if a navy is able to *systematise* sea control and sea denial to establish hemispheric or, even, global maritime dominance. So potent can this become that a maritime state can shift the balance of power against continental powers to dominate littoral spaces, even deep into land. The Royal Navy held command of the ocean for most of the 19th century, and alongside the US Navy, for much of the 1990s and 2000s.

The Soviet Union's demise left the UK, in conjunction with its allies and partners, free to refocus on command of the ocean. In the words of the 1998 Strategic Defence Review: 'At sea, the emphasis is continuing to move away from large scale maritime warfare and open-ocean operations in the North Atlantic' towards 'littoral operations and force projection, for which maritime forces are well suited.'¹² The new fleet would be smaller but more capable of projecting force to distant theatres particularly to deter or subdue obstinate authoritarian regimes and non-state actors. HM Government decided to order two large aircraft carriers and new amphibious ships, upgrade the Royal Navy's nuclear attack submarines to fire cruise missiles, and procure a globally deployable but less numerous force of destroyers and frigates, all backed by a fleet of larger auxiliaries.¹³ As Graph 1 shows, the number of warships would be reduced, but overall displacement – and by implication, the average size of a warship (which indicates the extent to which a navy is designed for global operations) – would go up.

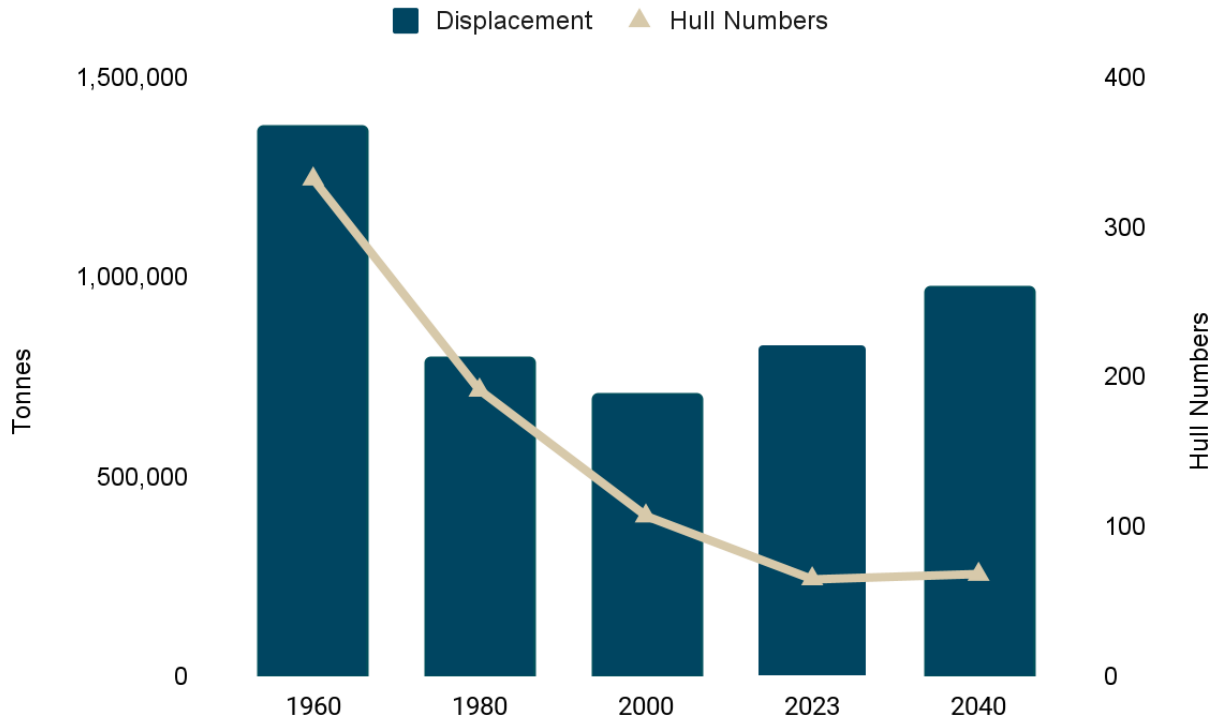
¹¹ Jon Robb-Webb, 'Light two lanterns, the British are coming by sea: Royal Navy participation in the Pacific 1944-45', Greg Kennedy (ed.), *British Naval Strategy East of Suez, 1900-2000: Influences and actions* (London: Frank Cass, 2005).

¹² 'Strategic Defence Review', Ministry of Defence, 07/1998, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

¹³ Arguably, a separate auxiliary fleet is one of the defining characteristics of a navy postured to command the ocean. These fleets provide systemic logistical support, allowing warships to remain at sea for extended periods, enabling a persistent or permanent naval presence. The UK Royal Fleet Auxiliary and US Military Sea Lift Command are the defining examples.



Graph 1: Size of the Royal Navy over time¹⁴



The return of geopolitical competition at sea

Over the past two decades, the geopolitical situation has changed substantially as Russia and the PRC have attempted to convert their growing power into more capable maritime postures. While Russia’s fleet has been partially modernised to re-enact sea denial in the North Atlantic, the PRC has accrued a more ambitious maritime agenda.

The Russian Navy’s modernisation in the Euro-Atlantic

Russia is not a natural maritime power: its geographic disposition – a lack of ports facing the open ocean and vulnerable land borders – discourage the country from building a navy capable of sea control. Even during the sustained naval buildup of the 1970s and 1980s, this was not attempted. Instead, the

¹⁴ Data constructed from various editions of *Jane's Fighting Ships* and the Royal Navy’s website.



Kremlin tends to posture towards sea denial, particularly in the North Atlantic. However, after the Soviet collapse, even this was difficult; while Russia's fleet looked large on paper, many of its warships and submarines were based on outdated technology, and many fell into a state of disrepair due to the dire state of the Russian economy.

Since the late 2000s, though, Russia has embarked on a significant military modernisation programme, with defence spending growing steadily from £36 billion in 2008 to £52 billion by 2021 (in constant 2022 pounds sterling).¹⁵ Though the Russian Navy did not receive all of this funding, it has benefited significantly. For starters, much of the newfound investment found its way into Russia's submarine fleet. The Russians have plans to build 25 modern nuclear powered submarines in the Yasen (nuclear attack) and Borei-class (ballistic missile) submarines, with four and six already in service, respectively, since the mid-2010s.¹⁶ In addition, the Kremlin has modernised its surface force, introducing a slew of new ships (such as the Admiral Gorshkov-class frigates) designed to provide small platforms for anti-ship missiles which can threaten NATO maritime forces with barrages of missiles close to Russia's coastline.

Through modernising its navy, Russia has acquired a more potent capacity to pursue sea denial in the North Atlantic, including in waters surrounding the British home islands. Despite NATO's maritime dominance, the Kremlin has pursued so-called 'grey-zone' actions to strike the Euro-Atlantic democracies beneath the threshold of military confrontation. These have been increasing in regularity and boldness since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, including covert reconnaissance missions of undersea infrastructure in the North and Baltic seas.¹⁷ Today, the Russian Navy is the only adversary capable of damaging Britain's network of critical maritime infrastructure.

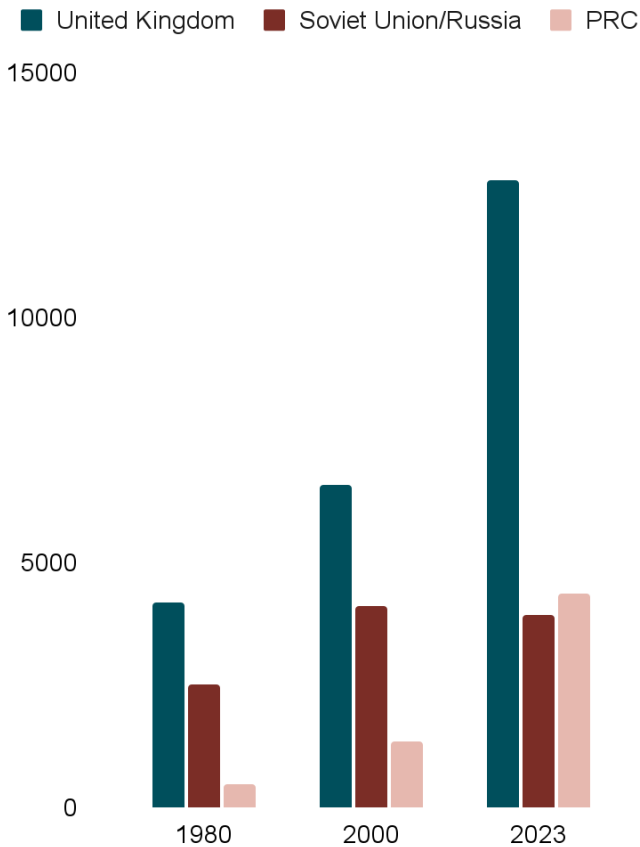
¹⁵ 'Military Spending Database', Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2023, <https://milex.sipri.org/> (checked: 15/01/2024). The Russians also plan to now increase spending to £96 billion for 2024, but much of this spending will likely be dedicated to reinforcing the Russian war effort against Ukraine.

¹⁶ 'Has the Russian submarine threat been diminished by the Ukraine war?', *Navy Lookout*, 11/04/2023 <https://www.navylookout.com/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

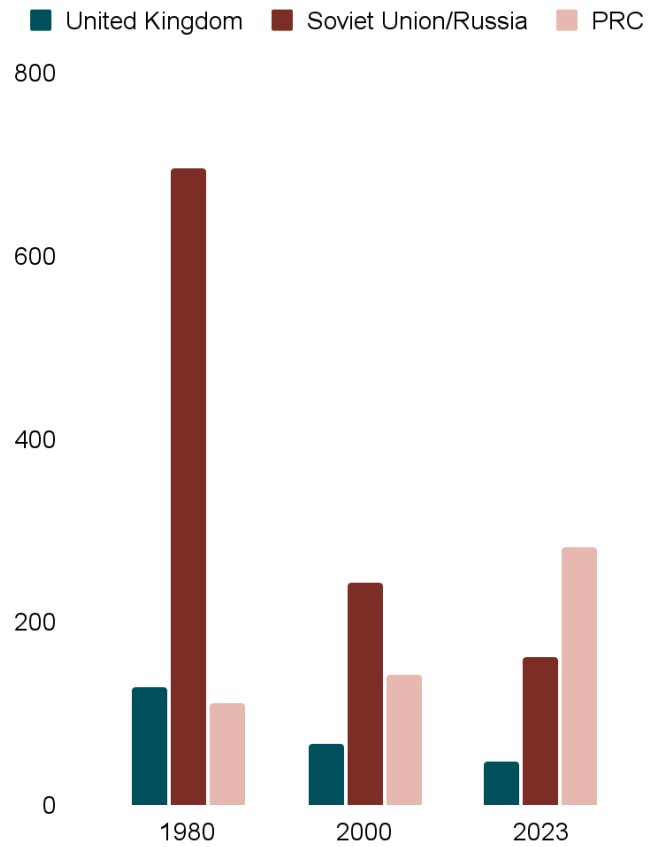
¹⁷ 'Russian spy ships mapping undersea infrastructure in the North Sea', *Navy Lookout*, 20/04/2023, <https://www.navylookout.com/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

The Royal, Russian and Chinese navies compared¹⁸

Graph 2: Average hull size

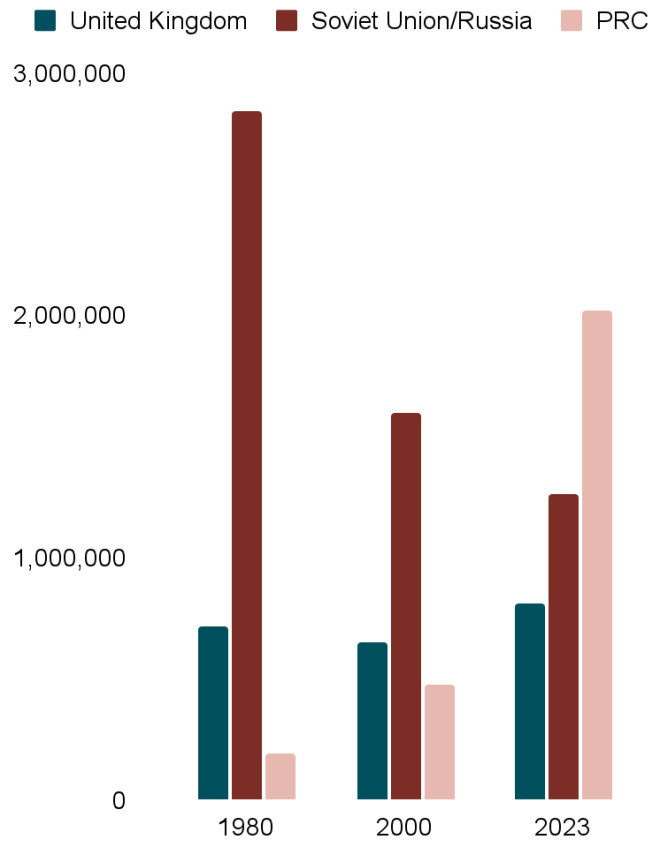


Graph 3: Hull numbers



¹⁸ Data for the following three graphs is taken from various editions of *Jane's Fighting Ships*. It should also be noted that the Russian figures for 2000 should be taken with a serious pinch of salt, as much of the fleet was de facto retired or in a state of disrepair due to lack of investment – although it is difficult to know accurately the true extent of this – but Jane's figures do not represent this in the data. *Jane's Fighting Ships 2000-2001* states: 'Since 1991 a shortage of funds to pay for dockyard repairs, spare parts and fuel [and ships' companies] has meant that many major surface warships have rarely been to sea, and few have operated away from their local exercise areas...many remain in commission but permanently in harbour'. See: Richard Sharpe (ed.), *Jane's Fighting Ships: 2000-2001* (Coulson: Jane's Information Group Ltd, 2000).

Graph 4: Tonnes



The PLAN’s bid for hemispheric power

Unlike Russia, the geostrategic position of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is more favourable to generating maritime power: the PRC has more secure borders (protected by the Himalayas and Gobi Desert) and one long coastline with ample warm water ports. However, the PRC’s naval power can be geographically contained by the so-called ‘first island chain’ – a line of islands running from Japan to the Philippines, through Borneo to Singapore. For much of modern history, the PRC, wracked by poverty and instability, could only attempt limited sea denial close to its shores. In 1980, over 600 of the PLAN’s total vessels (830+) were small missile/patrol craft of less than 360 tonnes – weakly armed and unable to operate far from the coast, nor for prolonged periods.

However, as it has grown in material power, the PRC has demonstrated clear ambitions to assert sea control within, and beyond, this barrier. Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, has stated the goal for the PLA is to be able to ‘fight and win’ and his government has taken serious steps

towards this goal.¹⁹ The PLAN is now central to the PRC's 'quest for great power', demonstrated by two significant shifts in Chinese grand strategy.²⁰ The first is the extraordinary growth in military expenditure – from £89 billion in 2008 to £237 billion in 2022 (in constant 2022 pounds sterling).²¹ The second is the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) shift in focus away from the terrestrial and towards the maritime domain. The PLA Ground Force (PLAGF) has been cut dramatically to 970,000 personnel (down from 4.3 million in 1980), while the total displacement of the PLAN has grown from 378,000 tonnes (1980) to a staggering 2.3 million today, representing an increase of some 516%.²²

Moreover, the promotion in December 2023 of Adm. Hu Zhongming, a PLAN submariner, to Commander of the PLAN and Adm. Dong Jun (the previous Commander) as the new Minister of National Defence – the first to come from a naval background – reflects the extent to which the CCP has embraced maritime power.²³

As the PLAN's posture has changed, the fleet has grown from a 'minnow' into a 'shark'.²⁴ After an array of new warships have been commissioned – 30 last year alone – the average displacement of a Chinese warship has ballooned from 455 tonnes in 1980 to 4,357 tonnes in 2023.²⁵ This build up complements the PRC's existing Anti-Access and Area-Denial (A2/AD) capabilities, which have been designed to deny opponents from enacting sea control within the first island chain.²⁶ Indeed, the PLAN is shifting focus from sea denial within the first island chain aided by A2/AD platforms, towards sea control within the first island chain shielded by such platforms. It is also apparent that the PLAN, with the building of large aircraft carriers and cruisers (e.g., the Type 003 and Type 055), is starting to develop the means to exert sea control beyond the first island chain – supported by a growing number of auxiliaries and overseas naval bases.²⁷

¹⁹ Bernard D. Cole, *China's Quest for Great Power: Ships, Oil, and Foreign Policy* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2016).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ 'Military Spending Database', Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2023, <https://milex.sipri.org/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

²² Gay Hammerman, *The Almanac of World Military Power: Fourth Edition* (London: Jane's Publishing Company, 1980).

²³ Mike Dahm, 'Who's Hu, the New PLAN Commander', *Proceedings*, 12/2023, <https://www.usni.org/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

²⁴ Kevin Rowlands and Edward Hampshire, 'The Chinese navy: From minnow to shark', Council on Geostrategy, 07/12/2022, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

²⁵ 'Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2023', Department of Defence (United States), 12/10/2023, <https://media.defense.gov/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

²⁶ Janne Haaland Matlary and Rob Johnson, *Military Strategy in the Twenty-First Century: The Challenge for NATO* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2020).

²⁷ On the prospect for a Chinese network of naval facilities beyond the PRC, see: Alex Wooley et. al., 'Harbouring Global Ambitions: China's Ports Footprint and Implications for Future Overseas Naval Bases', *AidData*, 25/07/2023, <https://www.aiddata.org/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

Implications of the new maritime geopolitics

Both Russia and the PRC have long had revisionist intent, but their growing material power – particularly at sea – now gives them the means to act on it to shape the international order in accordance with their interests. In the words of James Cleverly, then Foreign Secretary, during his speech to the Mansion House in April 2023:

At this moment, China is carrying out the biggest military build-up in peacetime history...And as we see this happening; as we watch new bases appearing in the South China Sea and beyond, we are bound to ask ourselves: what is it all for? Why is China making this colossal military investment? And if we are left to draw our own conclusions, prudence dictates that we must assume the worst.²⁸

Already, the PRC has used its growing maritime strength to threaten Taiwan, Japan and numerous countries surrounding the South China Sea. This shift in the maritime balance of power is compounded by declining European navies and the limits of US shipbuilding capacity, which has been allowed to atrophy.²⁹ From the Black Sea to the South China Sea, the strategic intent of Russia and the PRC stands in stark contrast to free and open countries, such as the UK, as well as its partners and allies.

Even absent the worst – a determined Russian or Chinese push against critical UK interests – a number of consequences would follow from failing to respond sufficiently to the modernisation and expansion of the Russian and Chinese navies:

1. Over time, Russia would gain the capacity to challenge British sea control in the North Atlantic, forcing the Royal Navy to adopt an increasingly defensive posture (i.e., one of sea denial). This would:
 - a. Reduce the UK's strategic autonomy;
 - b. Compel the Royal Navy to become a dedicated anti-submarine force;
 - c. Tie down British assets in the North Atlantic; and,
 - d. Reduce HM Government's ability to project power at long range, whether in established zones of priority such as the Caribbean or

²⁸ James Cleverly, Speech: 'Our position on China: Foreign Secretary's 2023 Mansion House speech', Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 25/04/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

²⁹ Jeremy Stöhs, *The Decline of European Naval Forces: Challenges to seapower in an age of fiscal and political uncertainty* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018).



South Atlantic, or regions of growing importance such as the Indo-Pacific.

2. Gradually, the PRC would consolidate its position in the East and South China seas, shifting from sea denial within the first island chain to outright sea control. This would:
 - a. Free up the PLAN to pursue sea denial, perhaps even regional forms of sea control, in more distant theatres (potentially even the Atlantic and the Arctic, including through tighter cooperation with Russia);³⁰
 - b. Compel the US to focus more on the Indo-Pacific, which would reduce its bandwidth for contributing to security in the Euro-Atlantic;
 - c. Encourage more brazen acts of coercion against regional neighbours;
 - d. Further undermine international norms and the legal regime established through the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, threatening the very foundations of the open international order.
3. Eventually, as Russian and especially Chinese naval capability grows, it will buttress their global position, reducing the UK's ability to attract and align allies and partners, particularly in the so-called 'middle ground'. It is no coincidence that deepened relations with Australia, Japan and ASEAN occurred after the Royal Navy's presence, including through the deployment of a carrier strike group, was expanded in the Indo-Pacific.

Preparing the Royal Navy for the future

In recent years, the Royal Navy has induced forms of 'strategic advantage' to compensate for the declining number of vessels and maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of the remaining fleet.³¹ New bases have been established in Bahrain and Oman to simplify logistics and extend the permanence of the British naval

³⁰ Since the end of the Cold War, and especially since 2010, cooperation between the PRC and Russia has grown substantially. See: Maria Papageorgiou and Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira, 'Assessing the Changing Sino-Russian Relationship: A Longitudinal Analysis of Bilateral Cooperation in the Post-Cold War Period', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 21/11/2023, <https://www.tandfonline.com/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

³¹ For more on the concept of 'strategic advantage', see: Gabriel Elefteriu, William Freer and James Rogers, 'What is strategic advantage?', Council on Geostrategy, 23/11/2023, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

presence in the Gulf and Indian Ocean; AUKUS has been formed to multiply and accelerate the development of new submarine capabilities and naval technologies, as well as to amplify interoperability and interchangeability with a key partner – Australia; various personnel rotations and mechanical and logistical improvements have been made to warships to increase their availability; and vessels are being equipped with new strike missiles, more anti-air warfare missiles, and ballistic missile defence capabilities.³²

Further catalysts could be generated to enhance the Royal Navy's ability to uphold presence and increase lethality. One option would be to procure additional offshore patrol vessels to free up more potent warships, which are sometimes deployed for anti-drug patrols in the Caribbean.³³ Another would be to boost survivability by adding more advanced anti-air close-in weapons systems (especially to the Type 23 frigates, which have none). Further, insofar as morale may have been undermined by attempts to squeeze additional capability from the existing fleet, a serious push could be made to enhance recruitment efforts and retain existing personnel. But even these forms of strategic advantage will not be enough to generate the scale the Royal Navy needs for the world of the 2030s and 2040s.

The need for a larger fleet

In 2021, the Defence Select Committee published a report titled 'We're going to need a bigger navy', which concluded the British fleet was not large enough to fulfil the objectives laid out in the Integrated Review.³⁴ While total displacement has grown, the number of hulls – which provide the Royal Navy with the means to foster presence (the prerequisite for both sea control and denial) – has been decreasing at an alarming rate and will only increase slightly by 2040.³⁵ Presently, in terms of major combatants, the Royal Navy has two large aircraft carriers, two amphibious vessels, four ballistic missile and six nuclear attack submarines, six destroyers, and 10 frigates (see: Graph 1). It plans to procure eight Type 26 and five Type 31 frigates. Other programmes – such as the Type 32 frigate and Type 83 destroyer – remain up in the air; it is also unclear how many

³² For example, the Type 23 frigates are being equipped with Naval Strike Missiles and the Type 45 destroyers are being fitted with Sea Ceptor close-in anti-air vertical launch systems, while their Sea Viper long-range anti-air system is being upgraded to shoot down ballistic missiles.

³³ 'Royal Navy destroyer scores £60m drugs bust in the Caribbean Sea', Royal Navy, 03/11/2023, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

³⁴ 'We're Going to Need a Bigger Navy: Third Report of Session 2021–22', House of Commons Defence Committee, 14/12/2021, <https://committees.parliament.uk/> (checked: 15/01/2024)

³⁵ Jeremy Stöhs, *The Decline of European Naval Forces: Challenges to seapower in an age of fiscal and political uncertainty* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018), p. 16.

of either class of vessel will be procured, though an overall escort fleet of 24 vessels has been proposed by the mid-2030s.³⁶

If the UK is to continue to lead NATO in terms of affecting sea control in the Euro-Atlantic against an aggressive Russia, enhance its contributions to sea denial in the Indo-Pacific to dissuade an expansionist PRC, and protect international shipping lanes (e.g., in the Red Sea), a larger navy is needed. In the Strategic Defence Review of 1998, HM Government deemed 32 destroyers and frigates and 10 nuclear attack submarines sufficient for the more benign environment. It is hard to believe that the mere five Type 31 and eight Type 26 frigates on order and a like-for-like replacement of Type 45 with Type 83 destroyers will now be enough, even if those vessels are all significantly more potent than their predecessors. Although additional forms of strategic advantage can be generated, in today's more volatile era, the Royal Navy requires more frigates, destroyers and nuclear attack submarines than contemporary plans envisage.

Undoubtedly, a larger fleet would require more personnel, despite the likely introduction of greater autonomy – in fact, increasing hull numbers may, in and of itself, aid with retention by reducing the workload placed on sailors and officers. Further, to amplify and extend the striking power of its naval forces, the UK should: furnish both aircraft carriers with a full suite of aircraft – meaning more F35B 'Lightning' Joint Combat Aircraft, as well as new autonomous and remotely-piloted air systems; end the practice of designing warships 'for but not with' key weapons systems; cease delays in constructing warships and submarines to make short-term financial savings; maximise the survivability of new vessels from the outset with the largest possible number of vertical launch silos; equip the Type 83 destroyers with a potent land attack capability; and introduce more novel weapons such as directed energy systems and specialist complementary vessels, such as arsenal ships to provide a strike group with additional defensive or offensive firepower.

Ideally, a larger and more potent navy would result from increased defence investment; HM Government has acknowledged the need to spend at least 2.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to secure British interests in a more contested world.³⁷ In 2023, the defence budget was £52.8 billion – approximately 2.1% of GDP.³⁸ So, assuming the UK economy does not contract, increasing defence

³⁶ 'When will the Royal Navy have 24 frigates and destroyers?', *Navy Lookout*, 17/03/2021, <https://www.navylookout.com/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

³⁷ See: Paul Seddon and Chris Mason, 'Rishi Sunak announces £5bn extra defence spending during US trip', *BBC News*, 13/03/2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

³⁸ See: 'MOD Departmental resources: 2023', Ministry of Defence, 30/11/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 15/01/2024) and 'Gross Domestic Product at market prices: Current price: Seasonally adjusted £m', Office for National Statistics, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/> (checked: 15/01/2024). On 10th November 2023, the UK's GDP was estimated to be £2.506 trillion.



spending to 2.5% of GDP would generate at least £10 billion more per year.³⁹ But no date has been set to reach this target.

Box 2: The impact of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine

Since February 2022, the strategic balance between NATO and Russia has changed fundamentally – in NATO's favour. Not only has the Russian Army been severely mauled by Ukraine, losing over 13,700 pieces of equipment so far – including many of its most modern systems – but European allies have begun to take active measures to boost their militaries.⁴⁰ Given that Russia has lost (a minimum of) 2,600 tanks so far and is estimated to produce no more than 250 annually, it could take over a decade to reconstitute its armoured formations.⁴¹ Meanwhile, NATO's land forces have been strengthened; e.g., by Poland's extensive armoured military expansion programme and the decision of Finland and Sweden (soon) to join the alliance, as well as Germany's 'Zeitenwende' (should it be fully-realised).

Alternatively – ideally in addition – HM Government should explore moving to a more 'focused' (as opposed to 'balanced' or 'joint') military posture, not unlike the path Australia has chosen in its recent Defence Strategic Review.⁴² Indeed, given the reduction in the terrestrial threat to NATO from Russia (see: Box 2), the UK is freer to prioritise the maritime domain. In any case, beyond Ukraine, Russia looks set to rely on its navy and air force – which have survived mostly unscathed (although not entirely, as the embarrassing loss of the Moskva shows) – to wield power. This likely shift in Russian strategy towards sea power as a result of the losses sustained in Ukraine is something the UK should be prepared for. And, as the 10th anniversary of NATO's defence spending pledge – issued in 2014 at the Wales Summit – approaches, Britain should do nothing to provide European allies, especially Germany, with excuses not to enhance their own terrestrial forces.⁴³

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ 'Attack On Europe: Documenting Russian Equipment Losses During The Russian Invasion Of Ukraine', *Oryx*, 24/02/2023, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

⁴¹ David Axe, 'In A Few Years, The Russian Army Could Run Out Of Tanks. What Happens Then?', *Forbes*, 17/02/2023, <https://www.forbes.com/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

⁴² Australia has opted to move away from a joint force towards one focused on the maritime domain. See: 'Defence Strategic Review', Department of Defence (Australia), 24/04/2023, <https://www.defence.gov.au/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

⁴³ 'Wales Summit Declaration', North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 05/09/2014, <https://www.nato.int/> (checked: 15/01/2024).

Conclusion

The Royal Navy is Britain's most powerful instrument. Facing increasingly potent maritime rivals and threats from multiple directions, the UK needs a fleet of sufficient size, posture, survivability and lethality to pursue and secure British interests. Absent increased investment in defence, the UK should prepare to develop a more focused force, predicated on the maritime domain. The current fleet of substantial, high-end vessels provides the nucleus around which a larger force can be generated. As in Nelson's time, a bigger navy will provide HM Government with the means to generate the presence and scale needed to deter opponents, dissuade competitors, align allies and partners, and uphold British interests.

*This Primer is part of the Council on Geostrategy's **Strategic Advantage Cell**.*

Annex 1: Types of major combatants and auxiliaries

Category	Primary role
Aircraft carrier (CV)	Naval airpower / Deep oceanic power projection
Light aircraft carrier (CVL)	Anti-submarine operations / Naval airpower
Large amphibious vessel (5,000+ tonnes)	Littoral combat / Disaster relief
Cruiser (CCG)	General purpose / Surface-to-surface missile strikes
Destroyer (DDG)	General purpose / Air defence
Frigate (FFG)	General purpose / Anti-submarine warfare
Ballistic missile submarine (SSBN)	Nuclear strike
Nuclear submarine (SSN, SSGN)	Long endurance underwater warfare / Littoral strike
Conventional Attack submarine (SSK)	Underwater warfare
Large Auxiliaries (5,000+ tonnes)	Resupply / Survey / Intelligence / Hospitals / Other

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