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Application of Sea Power on conflict management and solution, nationally and internationally  
- The Contemporary Application Of Sea Power by Dr. Eric Grove, CSS, The University of Hull

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The current strategic environment could not be more favourable for maritime forces. The post - September 11 'war against terror', so called, has legitimised an interventionist impulse that many western governments, including the United Kingdom's , have found all too seductive.

A novel determination not to be trammelled by the limitations of the UN Charter has , for better or worse, re-established force an acceptable instrument of politics, a willingness, as president Bush has put it, to be 'ready to strike at a moment's notice, in any corner of the world'. The British government has, ever since its election in 1997, made much of its interventionist role as 'a force for good' in the world. The emphasis of modern maritime operations is to create strategic effect ashore. These effects are defined in latest British statements as to prevent - 'to stop or limit the emergence and development of crisis and conflict';

- stabilise - 'to set the secure and stable conditions required for political and economic action';
- contain - 'to actively limit or restrain the spread, duration or influence of an adversary or crisis';
- deter - 'to dissuade an adversary from a course of action that he would otherwise embark upon , by diminishing his expected gains and/or raising his expected costs';
- coerce - the use of 'force or the threat of force to persuade an opponent to adopt a certain pattern of behaviour, against his wishes';
- disrupt - 'to disable an adversary's capability ...to prevent him functioning effectively by denying him his freedom of action';
- defeat - 'to reduce the effectiveness of an adversary so that he is no longer able to conduct combat operations';
- and destroy - 'to so damage an enemy state or non-state adversary that he is no longer militarily viable...ensuring that there remains no real immediate potential for the adversary to return to conflict.'

These effects are specifically related to 'contingent operations overseas.' [1]

This reflects the fact that 'power projection' in the broadest sense has become the dominating role of the world's major navies. The concept of 'power projection' has been significantly redefined in the latest official iterations of British defence policy. It has been narrowed down to the deployment of 'stand off military capabilities that are able to deliver significant force to deter or coerce.' The amphibious landing of troops is part of the surrounding military tasks, ie. humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, evacuation, peacekeeping. peace enforcement, focused intervention ('the ability to disrupt or destroy the threat with the rapid and localised

use of force') and deliberate intervention ('with as much combat power as is necessary to defeat or destroy an adversary').[2]

In this context it is natural that the leading 'core maritime role' for the modern Royal navy is 'maritime force projection' in its two dimensions of 'littoral manoeuvre' and 'maritime strike'. This reflects the expected strategic environment which requires 'a clear focus on projecting force further afield and even more quickly than has previously been the case. This places a premium on the deployability and sustainability of our forces, sometimes in circumstances where access, basing and overflight cannot be guaranteed.' [3] In this situation maritime forces must be the natural forces of choice. Their capacity to use most of the surface of this misnamed planet ('Oceania' is more accurate than 'Earth') and to gain access to the majority of the world's population means they are basic to an ability to exert military power anywhere in uncertain world - as and when required and with minimum host nation support. Moreover, their capacity to operate in an environment and in a way in which it is difficult for asymmetric threats such as small explosive boats and ballistic missiles to be effective makes them even more useful against current threats.

It has become almost a cliché to stress that maritime forces now operate in the littoral, if I may quote my own definition from British Maritime Doctrine, the 'coastal sea areas and that portion of the land which is susceptible to influence or support from the sea.'[4] That portion of the land might be quite large. In Operation 'Enduring Freedom' Afghanistan, a land locked country, was converted into the littoral with carrier based aircraft carrying out most of the bombing sorties and sea basing providing a vital component of land operations. The use of a US aircraft carrier as an early deployed special operations base demonstrated that such activities could be carried out even if host nation support was unavailable (making the eventual provision of that support more likely). The availability of secure floating bases allowed operations ashore a vital measure of greater security.[5]

Afghanistan was a coalition operation and these are now emphasised as the overriding scenario for larger scale involvement. Recent statements assert the need for sufficient capabilities to allow national operations at 'small to medium scale' or to provide 'framework nation' capabilities at these levels in European or other coalition operations. A 'small' scale operation in the maritime context might require a couple of destroyers or frigates plus a submarine and, if an intervention, two amphibious ships. A medium scale intervention operation might demand a carrier, nine destroyers and frigates, all eight amphibious ships, eight mine countermeasures vessels and two submarines.[6] Any larger scale operation (such as the invasion of Iraq) is now said to require a coalition framework. Indeed, the latest statement states baldly that 'the most demanding expeditionary operations, involving intervention against state adversaries can only plausibly be conducted if US forces are engaged, either leading a coalition or in NATO. Where the UK chooses to be engaged we will wish to be able to influence political and military decision making throughout the crisis, including during the post conflict period. The significant military contribution the UK is able to make to such operations means that we can secure an effective place in the political and military decision making processes. To exploit this effectively our Armed Forces need to be interoperable with US command and control structures, match the US operational tempo and provide those capabilities that deliver the greatest impact when operating alongside the US.'[7]

This policy can be clearly seen in the current British aircraft carrier (CVF) programme, the principal embodiment of the MFP emphasis. Only a large carrier able to operate up to 36 F-35

aircraft at a sortie generation rate of about 100 a day can give sufficient leverage in a coalition air plan. Nimitz class US carriers carry around fifty tactical aircraft and can sustain a rate of 140 sorties a day, mostly by F/A -18s. Given the limited numbers of F-35Cs to be carried in future US carrier groups (about 25 per cent of total complement) the CVF will bring to the table a remarkably large proportion of the stealthy air strike assets available to a joint force air controller from his most secure and available bases.

It is currently uncertain as to the precise configuration of the UK CVF. At the end of 2002 it was a vessel of around 54,000 tons configured to operate the short take off/vertical landing F-35B with some form of rotary winged maritime airborne surveillance and control aircraft (MASC). Latest news, however, is that the impact of the Blair government's planned reductions in platforms as part of its coalition effects based strategy is making the RAF worry that an excessive proportion of its deployable fast jet offensive support aircraft front line, now only 64 aircraft, will be STOV/L. This has created interest in acquiring the 'CV' variant, F-35C, with its longer range. A ship of about 62,000 tons would be most suitable for such an aircraft and this impressive ship would also be able to operate Hawkeye as MASC. It would also have useful interoperability advantages with the USA and France.

This RAF's reported advocacy of a large conventional take-off and landing (CTOL) carrier demonstrates the revolution wrought by the application of joint concepts to carrier aviation. The creation of Joint Force Harrier as a first step in this direction has not been without its problems but it is leading to Invincible class carriers of significantly enhanced strike potential with the networked Harrier GR aircraft being issued to two predominantly 'dark blue' squadrons. Given the foreseeable strategic environment, the withdrawal of the Sea Harrier FA-2, configured for the wrong kind of war in the wrong place against the wrong enemy, is often overstated in its impact. Also, joint carrier groups offer great opportunities for smaller powers to give their air power the advantages of secure and mobile basing. They need not be based in specialist carriers. As the US Marine Corps demonstrates, flat topped amphibious ships offer enormous potential for sea basing aircraft as well as other assets. The potential of the STOV/L F-35B flexibly to operate from both floating and semi prepared land bases has considerable potential for air forces in maritime and relatively underdeveloped region.

Power projection assets are becoming the centrepieces of Europe's navies. In addition to the two projected carriers Britain is commissioning two new LPDs and four new LSD(A)s of the Bay class (the latter austere LPDs) to replace all but one of the smaller, less capable LSLs. Hopes to keep an Invincible class ship as an LPH have now been abandoned but there are plans to use the second CVF as an LPH if necessary, just as the CVSs have been used in recent conflicts. Other navies are building impressive power projection assets also:-France two flat topped 21,500 ton support and command ships of the Mistral class plus a second, larger aircraft carrier based on the CVF design. The Netherlands is building another Rotterdam type LPD with better helicopter facilities and is examining a helicopter carrying role for its new auxiliaries. Spain, who already has two of the Rotterdam type, is building a larger flat topped strategic projection ship that could act either as an assault asset or as a second carrier. Italy is building a 26,500 ton STOV/L carrier Cavour although Germany has had to shelve - temporarily one hopes - plans for up to three Rotterdam type LPDs. Even Denmark has quite self consciously re-orientated its navy in the power projection direction for crisis response and peace support. Two 6,300 ton 'combat support ships' are being built able to act in a wide range of roles including transporting 200 troops that can be supported by a 5-in gun firing extended range gun munitions (ERGM)

The new Danish 'patrol ships' (frigates) may well carry land attack missiles in their vertical launch systems. This is the theme for most European navies. Putting Tomahawk on the Type 45 air defence destroyer has been an important RN priority but it now looks as if the alternative of ERGM may be pursued instead. These ships which are also configured to carry groups of 30 troops will be cruisers in all but name. The future surface combatants planned by Britain, France and Italy will have land attack as a major role. The potential of the modern surface combatant against the shore is demonstrated by the planned capabilities of the US Navy's DDX with its 155mm guns able to fire ERGMs at ten rounds a minute out to 100 miles.

With firepower of this range and accuracy the accent is on network enabled capability. There is nothing new in this for navies. Since the Second World War the integration and use of electronically generated data has been the essence of naval warfare. Data links and computerised data management have been around for years. What is new is extent of the information now available and the speed of its delivery. The American joint fires system allows timely, precision engagement of targets many miles inland; cooperative engagement capability allows a complete fire control quality radar picture to be obtained across a whole force. These and other networks pose interoperability challenges to coalition allies. In order to fight with the US resources must be spent on making sure one can join the network, even at the expense of platform numbers. Interestingly the latest British White Paper provides a rationale for reduction in surface combatant numbers by arguing that in the most demanding operations the coalition framework will mean that 'naval escorts are less likely to be at a premium.' [8]

As stated above the modern surface combatant is now less of an 'escort' and more of a general purpose weapons and C2 platform. This brings us to the question of the place of sea control in contemporary maritime strategy. In current Royal Navy terminology sea control is part of 'theatre entry' and the core of 'flexible global reach'. So far so good, but the assured access available in recent operations and the investment priority in power projection has tended to downgrade at least some sea denial threats. New AAW assets are impressive but ASW is being neglected. Reportedly performance in recent NATO anti-submarine warfare exercises has been mixed, to say the least, and care must be taken to stop hard gained expertise withering away to be learnt all over again.

Submariners of the dominant global coalition are facing something of a crisis in the modern strategic world. Networking has special challenges for subsurface craft and if one dominates the maritime environment there is little need to submerge. Submarines do still have special advantages as covert intelligence gatherers, as recent operations by the Norwegians in the Mediterranean have vindicated. It is interesting, however that they no longer are as interested in air independent propulsion as the existing boats can snort with relative security in this less demanding environment. Nuclear power is more important than ever as a way of getting a covert cruise missile or special forces platform a long way in a short time but the very high costs of ownership lead to questions being posed by naval planners about the expense of SSNs in the longer term. Both Britain and France are still building new and improved classes, however, and neither navy will wish to give up such a fundamental capability that easily.

The underwater threat that is always with us is the mine, as was shown yet again in the Iraq operations. Littoral operations by definition emphasise mine warfare and mine countermeasures (MCM). A major problem here is that the classic MCM vessel is a small, relatively slow asset built essentially for operations in home waters; its strategic mobility is

poor. There is a real requirement among the power projection states for MCM capacity that is both more strategically deployable and which can be used more 'in stride'. It is in MCM that uninhabited underwater vehicles (UUVs) probably have their greatest long term potential. A problem however is that current MCM vessels, given the materials from which they are built, have long lives; they are also expensive. One cannot replace them overnight, even if one wanted to. Here is a place for innovative thinking.

It is often argued that this recent move to the littoral is something novel. In fact the current fixation with this environment has a long pedigree. One can detect a kind of 'oscillation' as, due to both strategic and technological factors, navies moved out to sea in the eighteenth century and then back to the littoral in the nineteenth. It is instructive to read statements of the mid nineteenth century that look remarkably modern in their littoral emphasis. Armour was first introduced primarily to assist ships in the engagement of forts. Then, however times changed. In the 1880s the coast attack armour plated ships of the ironclad age became sea going 'battleships'. It is no coincidence that this exactly coincided with the renaissance of 'sea power' thinking with Colomb and Mahan. The latter disliked amphibious operations as diversions from the main duties of the fleet. By the First World War littoral capabilities had atrophied to a significant extent, as the Dardanelles showed. Naval warfare was all about command of the sea and its possible denial.

Littoral power projection, side by side with the battle for sea control, reappeared once again in World War Two both in terms of amphibious landings and carrier air power. The dynamics of the Cold War continued to place some premium on these latter capabilities. Nevertheless the confrontation of Soviet and Western navies on the high seas created a new 'blue water' emphasis to which the Mahanian instincts of the US and Royal Navies responded (although, paradoxically perhaps, much of the fighting was planned to take place in the littoral). Only the end of the Cold War nipped this process in the bud and began the current return to the current littoral priority.

The British maritime strategist Sir Julian Corbett always emphasised the 'maritime' relevance of naval forces, ie their influence on that part of the world which mankind inhabits, the land. This potential is huge, given the key salience of the oceans as a means of communication and access. As European states move back into a global frame it is natural that they should look to their maritime forces as the foundation of their capabilities to 'reach out and touch' enemies. At present those enemies cannot do much in return at sea, but one can almost be sure that this situation will not persist for ever. Still, on the 1815 timescale there is a long way to go until 2060 or so.

For the foreseeable planning horizon, therefore, it is understandable that naval policy in Britain, as well as in other European countries will follow primarily the power projection path. This is, indeed, offering European navies one of the most secure futures they have ever faced. By the second decade of this century the capacity of the Royal Navy to reach out and touch enemies with effectiveness and precision will have been truly transformed. It will be able to make an even more significant contribution to a coalition task force than the current fleet does today. One hopes that future governments will use these enhanced capabilities with wisdom and restraint.

Notes:

[1] 'Delivering Security in a Changing World', Supporting Essays, Cm 6041-II, December 2003, p6.

[2] Ibid., p5

[3] Cm 6041-I, p7

[4] BR 1806.

[5] N. Friedman, Terrorism, Afghanistan and America's New Way of War, Annapolis, 2003

[6] 'Delivering Security in a Changing World, Future Capabilities', Cm 6269, July 2004, p.16

[7] Cm 6041-I, p8.

[8] Ibid., p7