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What Happened to the Royal Navy? Benign Neglect.

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In 1990, the Royal Navy operated three light aircraft carriers, 12 destroyers, 34 frigates, 26 mine vessels, 21 patrol ships, a 12-ship amphibious squadron, and 30 submarines. Enabling all of that were a variety of jet, propeller, and helicopter squadrons, an array of survey, support and specialist ships, and a brigade of Royal Marines (around 5,000 personnel). That fleet operated in a truly global manner, providing consistent and unbroken presence in the five oceans of the world, and many of the connecting seas.

Today, the Royal Navy cannot provide a single asset to protect Cyprus. The only ship left in the Persian Gulf is decommissioned and about to be towed away for disposal. There are more people in the Royal Navy's headquarters than there are sailors at sea. The one submarine that is available is in Australia.

The decline in capability, mass, and coverage of the Royal Navy since 1990 is a dire tale to review, beginning in the 1970s. It has become a popular pastime to blame successive governments, political leaders, and other services for the woes of the senior service. Certainly, they share a common responsibility; David Cameron, for example, cut defence spending every year he was in power. But that is not the whole story. Politicians act on the advice and options presented to them. Naval leaders since the 1990s have not made their case for funding or vessel numbers. Nor have they outlined a future in which hard military power would be needed (i.e., the future that has become today's reality).

Successive Royal Navy chiefs have demonstrated a failure in imagination, an inability to debate and win their cases, constant attempts to maximise utilisation of ships and people instead of preserving their utility for combat and war, and a shared, single-minded vision of an aircraft carrier-centric navy at the expense of everything else. This cross generational poor decision-making has not been a deliberate attempt to weaken every arm of the navy, but each of these misjudgements has resulted in a steady degradation of fighting power and reputation across what was once a

potent fighting force.

It is hard to determine which of these failures is the most serious. The most deeply entrenched and damaging issue has been the belief, since the 1980s, that the only worthy ambition was for a navy with carrier power at its heart; an ambition that suffused the force plan that emerged from the (unfunded) UK Strategic Defence Review undertaken by Lord Robertson in 1998. That force plan foresaw a Royal Navy built around powerful task groups; one for land attack (based around a conventionally (i.e., non-nuclear) powered carrier with catapults to launch fixed wing aircraft); and one for amphibious operations. Each group would be fully enabled with protection from land, air, sea, and subsurface threats, with attack options in various guises, and would be self-sustaining for independent sovereign warfighting capability. In addition to these task groups, the Royal Navy was also charged with maintaining a constant geographic presence in the Antarctic, the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, the Caribbean Sea, the North Atlantic Ocean, the South Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Furthermore, the Royal Navy would contribute to NATO maritime force groups, each with suitably equipped and sustained frigates and destroyers. The Royal Navy's submarine force would provide and protect the UK's independent continuous-at-sea deterrent force, would provide patrols in the North Atlantic, the Norwegian Sea and elsewhere as needed, and would protect the various task groups from undersea threats. The now defunct mine warfare force was, ironically, focused on the provision of mine clearance operations in the Straits of Hormuz and each of the UK's Overseas Territories had naval assets assigned to their protection. In retrospect, this was a well-balanced, considered, and deliverable force design that met the enduring political goals of the state, the government's obligations for security (to meet NATO and other treaty commitments and legal requirements and to satisfy the needs of UK national defence), whilst retaining sufficient mass to react to contingencies. Never before had the Royal Navy had its requirements spelt out so clearly.

However, what soon became apparent was that such a well-balanced force was not going to be as cheap as naval chiefs had promised. Compromises (cuts) to the force structure would have to be made, a fact exacerbated by the continually growing costs of the two new aircraft carriers (one planned to be available at all times).[1] Instead of seeking to maintain a balanced set of capabilities, naval leaders continued to sacrifice any and every part of the fleet to pay for the flat-tops.

For example, while threat analysis conducted by the Royal Navy dictated a requirement for 15 destroyers to provide adequate protection for both the carrier and amphibious task groups,[2] the orders reduced first to 12, then 8, and finally 6. Similarly, various naval chiefs sought to overcome the inevitability of 'naval maths' that determined the total frigate and destroyer requirement.[3] Many of those same naval chiefs adopted options to run the navy like a business, with an attitude to efficiency and short-term pain that produced nothing but increased strategic risk for the nation, and more day-to-day risk for the sailors at sea. Nothing was off the table as costs ballooned for the carrier programme. Moreover, with the navy having to demonstrate that it could be 'more efficient' and make sacrifices in line with internal priorities, cuts to force capabilities continued year-on-year in maintenance, training and equipment upkeep. Even if a defence minister tested naval leaders about the cumulative risk to its capability that the navy would be carrying, naval chiefs presented

[1] The original cost for the entire programme was budgeted at £3.5 billion, but the two hulls alone eventually cost £7.6 billion.
[2] Between 3 and 5 destroyers with the carrier task group, and 5 for the amphibious group (the latter being closer into the shore and therefore requiring all round protection). Pragmatic planning dictated that 2 destroyers would be in deep-maintenance and unavailable. Hence 12 being the minimum number that could ensure the task group would survive an attack on it.
[3] Almost all global navies accept the reality that to keep one ship permanently deployed (in peacetime), four hulls are needed (one in deep maintenance, one 'working up' [training] for the task, and one recovering, as well as the one deployed).

scant evidence of anything contrary to their desired plans. Reports were commissioned that used evidence selectively to support their assumptions; alternative options were classified and risks were glossed over.

Those risks - that continued to grow over 35 years - became inculcated as normal business within the naval community; ships deployed without key personnel and skills, with degraded equipment, and incomplete training. None of this was malicious, however. It was, rather, a reflection of the willingness of naval leaders to sacrifice anything in order to obtain the fetishised aircraft carrier platforms.

This core part of naval ambition was based on a common belief in a linear future of progress and peace; that technology would determine the victor in any future campaign, that only highly skilled technical people would matter, and that the Royal Navy would never have to fight a conventional war against a near peer adversary again. In hindsight it is perhaps too easy to lambast those leaders for their failure to acknowledge, consider, and most of all to learn the lessons that were emerging in wars at sea (or ashore) taking place around the world, relying instead on the outdated assessments provided by the UK Ministry of Defence. Naval chiefs saw the role of the fleet as more ambassadorial than preparing for combat. Ships, submarines, their crews and commanding officers were assessed on their ability to hold a cocktail party, to perform disaster relief, or how smartly they were able to bring a ship into harbour. The retirement of Falklands War veterans left a gap in the corporate knowledge of the Royal Navy regarding warfare which had been the key differentiator from other navies.

Instead of drawing upon this experience and knowledge, leaders of the Royal Navy have adopted a relationship with technology as their guiding star. The belief in success through sophisticated equipment, rather than through the work of people or a way of fighting, was reflected in the way sailors, marines and aviators were treated within the service. Chefs, engi-

-neers, gunners, maintainers, watch-keepers, medics, logisticians, marines and submariners were all disregarded and overlooked by senior officers who considered that technology would answer every problem they faced. It is a peculiar view given the experience that the naval force has had with what technology actually delivers when it eventually arrives. Radars do not work as designed, guns have reliability issues, command systems fail to match the promise of salesmen, missiles do not hit every target, the reliability of engines has been dubious; the list is almost endless. Yet against this experience, naval leaders continue to prefer to believe what technology companies tell them.

Until recently, more effort has been placed on diplomatic missions for the Royal Navy than in preparing for combat. The deployment of a carrier task group to the Far East was a vanity project, sold to political leaders as necessary in maintaining the UK's global position. In terms of warfare, the only thing it achieved was to burn away the readiness, hull life, and capacity of the entire force when time might have been better spent in places closer to the UK (the Arctic, North Sea, Norwegian Sea, Baltic Sea, Mediterranean, or Persian Gulf) – or perhaps even in supporting presence and deterrence postures in Overseas Territories. Deployments such as this are, perhaps, emblematic of the disconnect between naval leaders' ideas of the world and the purpose of the Royal Navy therein, and the rapidly changing strategic realities of contemporary international security.

Because of this, the numbers of naval vessels available for tasking has been cut away. Accompanied by a multitude of micro-decisions made across more than 35 years, the UK's senior military service is a shadow of its former self. Now out of balance in design, with poorly conceived priorities, relying on unevidenced promises of technological superiority, and with an attitude to people that alienates them from their leaders, any path to recovery will need to reverse the cultures so deeply engrained and stop promoting officers to positions in which they have no hope of

delivering success. More than anything else, the Royal Navy needs to reinvest in teaching its future leaders to debate, to argue, to be critical, and to seek (and welcome) challenge. Those facets of naval capability have been sorely absent for nearly a century.

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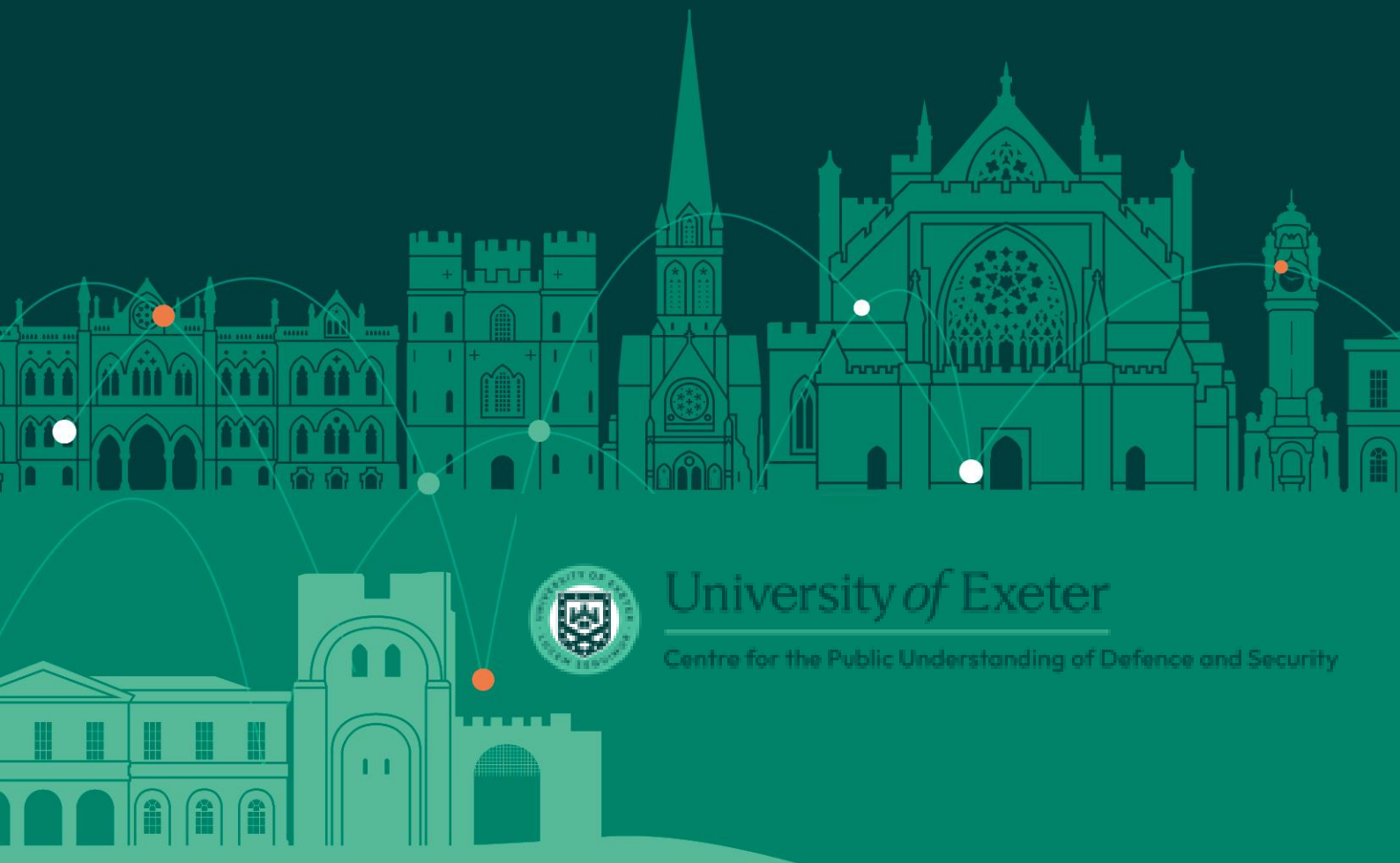

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