

Speech: DSEI maritime conference 2017

It's a privilege to kick off today's conference, and DSEI, with an opportunity to speak to such a distinguished and knowledgeable audience from across government, academia and industry.

We have just heard from the Secretary of State about the many ways in which the UK's prosperity and security are intertwined.

Our task for the remainder of the day is to consider the specific maritime contribution to that relationship.

However, we are also joined by representatives of some of our partner navies, so the aim of my speech is to frame those discussions more broadly by considering the role the Royal Navy can play to support the UK's continuing responsibilities and its growing global ambition.

Investment

The arrival of HMS Queen Elizabeth in Portsmouth last month could hardly have come at a better time.

I'm sure I was not the only one who felt a great sense of pride, but also a degree of reassurance. After all the uncertainty and self-doubt of a tumultuous year for the UK, here was proof in the most majestic and muscular terms that we are still a great maritime industrial nation.

However, I also detected a more profound change.

Just a few years ago, many commentators were questioning why the UK needed large carriers at all, now some of those same individuals are saying they can't come soon enough.

And then, just last month, the Prime Minister described HMS Queen Elizabeth as a symbol of Britain's desire to forge a new confident role for ourselves in the world.

It seems that the nation is rediscovering the potential of its navy, and not a moment too soon.

The question for today is where we go from here.

At the end of the Second World War, Winston Churchill described Britain as being at the centre of what he called 3 'majestic circles': Europe, the Commonwealth and the alliance of English speaking peoples.

These weren't only majestic circles, they were of course also maritime circles.

When President De Gaulle rejected Britain's first attempt to join the Common Market in the 1960s, he described Britain as being 'insular and maritime':

She is linked through her interactions, her markets and her supply lines to the most diverse and often the most distant countries...She has, in all her doings, very marked and very original habits and traditions.

In hindsight, it's hard to disagree with him.

Our relationship with Europe has always been defined by the presence of the Channel. We trod our own path in the world, and our prosperity was founded on global maritime trade, and protected by a strong, globally deployed Royal Navy.

Later, as Britain's imperial power waned, the emergence of the transatlantic partnership would find its ultimate expression at sea, beginning as it did with the leasing of destroyers and continuing today with our nuclear cooperation beneath the waves.

And it was the Atlantic Charter, agreed at sea 76 years ago onboard the battleship Prince of Wales, that would form the basis for much of the post-war order.

Europe

These circles have governed our security for 70 years, but today all 3 are in motion.

Our decision to leave the European Union clearly changes our political relationship with the continent.

Yet the Royal Navy's work alongside our continental partners continues, from the lifesaving duties of HMS Echo in the Mediterranean to HMS Duncan's recent programme of exercises and visits in the Black Sea. And I'm pleased that my Romanian counterpart Rear Admiral Mursu can be with us at DSEI this week.

I see no reason why the Royal Navy's continental partnerships should not continue to strengthen once we are outside the EU.

France remains one of our 2 key strategic maritime partners. The 45 year old link between the Royal Marines and their Dutch counterparts is in robust health. We are deepening our cooperation with Nordic and Baltic nations, and several European navies are now totally reliant on the Royal Navy for their sea training.

The strategic, operational and financial imperatives driving this cooperation are not about to change.

Most importantly of all, NATO remains the cornerstone of British defence policy, with the Royal Navy currently commanding 2 of the alliance's 4 standing maritime groups.

NATO

However, our reliance on NATO is growing at a time when the organisation's collective resolve is under intense scrutiny, from Russia, but also from within the alliance.

As one of the few nations to meet NATO's 2% defence spending target, the UK has a good story to tell.

The renewal of the nuclear deterrent is further evidence of our commitment, while the advent of carrier strike will present a massive uplift in our ability to contribute to multi-national operations.

Both these projects rest on the continuing strength of the US/UK partnership.

The participation of the USS George H.W. Bush Strike Group in Exercise Saxon Warrior off the coast of Scotland last month was a case in point.

The Bush Strike Group was on its way home from long and intensive operations against Daesh. After passing the Straits of Gibraltar they could have simply carried on across the Atlantic bound for home.

But instead they opted to spend 2 weeks working with the Royal Navy, to help us develop the skills and experience we will need to deliver a UK Carrier Strike Group over the next few years.

The Royal Navy is hugely grateful, but the US aren't supporting us for reasons of sentiment or history.

They are supporting us because it's in their national interest to see the UK developing the necessary tools to help shoulder the burden of international maritime security; US support is but a stepping stone on the path to a full UK operating capability.

US Marine Corps F35B joint strike fighters will join those from the UK for HMS Queen Elizabeth's first deployment in 2021, but after that it's down to us.

Having invested so much practical and political capital in us, our American friends will be watching closely to see if the UK is serious about remaining their partner of choice; and if we aren't, then others are waiting to take our place.

So as First Sea Lord, I intend to see through our strategic ambition and deliver the full potential of carrier strike.

As for the fleet more generally, the competing demands of Russia's resurgence and the varied security challenges unfolding across the Mediterranean raise important questions about priorities for investment.

The debate between defence at home and at range, and the corresponding trade-off between high and low end equipment, is a perennial one for navies everywhere.

Looking ahead, I have every expectation that Brexit may lead to a renewed emphasis on counter migration and fishery protection in our territorial waters. But I don't suspect our global commitments to lessen as a result.

So the challenge for the Royal Navy, and for similar navies, is to maintain the necessary balance between the 2 within the resources we have.

The bigger the navy the easier it is to get the balance right. The Royal Navy has worked hard to maintain our war fighting edge, while retaining enough mass to fulfil the drumbeat of constabulary tasks that come our way. But at a time of worsening security, and rising demand, it becomes much harder to strike that balance.

The publication of the [National Shipbuilding Strategy](#) last week is therefore hugely welcome, as is the development of the Type 31e general purpose frigate that will serve as its pathfinder project.

The challenge is to produce a design that is simultaneously credible, affordable and exportable. No easy task, but export success means longer production runs, greater economies of scale and lower unit costs and therein lies the opportunity to grow the navy.

And if other navies were to buy or build their own variants of the Type 31e, then there are options for closer partnership too.

The addition of a permanent Royal Navy training team to somewhere like Bahrain could, for example, open opportunities for those navies that want to benefit from the expertise of the Royal Navy's renowned Flag Officer Sea Training organisation but are unable to send ships to the UK.

But the real prize is a more competitive, more resilient, industrial capacity, one that is able to serve the Royal Navy's long term needs in a way that furthers both our prosperity and security.

Gulf/Asia-Pacific

The prospect of a larger navy presents an historic opportunity to strengthen and potentially expand our global footprint, which brings me to the third and final circle.

When Britain joined the Common Market in 1973, some took it as a sign that we had chosen a new future in Europe over our traditional global partnerships.

Whatever the truth of that, the Royal Navy continued to work with Commonwealth countries in West Africa and the Caribbean, and our traditional partners East of Suez, while the Royal Marines have training teams all around the world.

The opening of HMS Jufair in Bahrain later this year has been warmly welcomed by our partners in the Gulf as a sign of the UK's enduring commitment to the region.

Of course, we are not the only ones investing in new facilities.

China's 'string of pearls' has already stretched from Sri Lanka and Pakistan across the Indian Ocean to Djibouti and Oman, and all the way to Sudan, linking 2 of the fastest growing economic regions in the world.

It remains to be seen what the implications of this may be for Western partnerships.

It also begs the question about whether the Royal Navy's work in support of UK prosperity should end at the Gulf, or whether we need to project to the Indian Ocean, and beyond.

The Asia-Pacific region contains 2 of the 3 largest economies in the world, and 5 of the largest 16. If the UK does wish to forge new global trading partnerships, this is somewhere we need to be.

But with economic opportunity comes the expectation that the UK will also contribute to the stability and security that underpins the region's growing prosperity.

I am honoured that my friend and counterpart Rear Admiral John Martin has made the long journey from New Zealand to be with us today.

The familial bonds between us are still strong, and I sense our reputation in the region remains high.

The Royal Navy's legal and hydrographic expertise is, for example, a trusted source of advice in seeking a peaceful resolution to maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

However, reputation is not enough by itself, it's presence that really counts.

And the more we talk the talk about freedom of navigation and the rule of law, the more we are expected to walk the walk.

As the Prime Minister announced last month, HMS Argyll will visit the Asia-Pacific region in 2018 for exercises under the Five Powers Defence Arrangements and with other partners.

As the first Royal Navy warship to visit the region in 4 years, this will be a significant opportunity for defence engagement, but the question is what comes next?

As India discovers the complexities of developing an indigenous carrier capability, they're looking to the Royal Navy for closer partnership, including task group level exercises.

Japan recognises that the UK is a maritime nation situated on the edge of a continental landmass, just like them. As they make careful steps toward a more active naval posture the Royal Navy and Royal Marines are natural partners.

Meanwhile, the Type 26 frigate is a genuine contender for both the Australian

and New Zealand future frigate programmes and the Type 31e could meet the requirements of other smaller regional navies.

So how do we position ourselves to capitalise on this?

As a comparison, for the modest outlay of a few forward deployed patrol vessels, light frigates and maritime aircraft based in the region, France has considerable influence in Asia-Pacific.

The recent establishment of a British defence staff in Singapore is a sign that UK defence is starting to consider our options in this area in a similar light

The new UK joint logistics support base at Duqm in Oman could serve as a springboard for more frequent Royal Navy deployments across the Indian Ocean.

The deployment of the UK Carrier Strike Group to this region in the 2020s would be welcomed by many of our partners, and would be a powerful sign of our ambition.

And we still have berthing rights in Singapore. With a growing navy, it would be perfectly possible to base Type 31e frigates in South East Asia, just as we do with smaller ships in Bahrain and the Falklands today.

Of course, all these things are not yet policy. They are examples of what we could do, and our long term aspirations must be tempered against near-term challenges; such as our manpower recovery programme, which is working, but will take time and we must be patient.

But the fact remains: if we are serious about our nation's global economic ambitions, then we will need a global navy to match, and the opportunities are there, should we wish to use them.

A new era of maritime power

Let me begin to wrap this up.

With the decision to renew the nuclear deterrent last July, and the sailing of HMS Queen Elizabeth this summer, 2 decades of debate and ambition have given way to a period of focused delivery for the Royal Navy.

This year, the Tide class tankers have started arriving and the first batch 2 offshore patrol vessel has begun sea trials, with more of each to follow. We've cut steel on the first Type 26 frigate and we will soon lay the keel for the seventh Astute class submarine.

We take nothing for granted, and we certainly have challenges to work through, manpower chief among them, but in equipment terms, our future is more secure today than it has been for some time

The political and economic challenges of developing the necessary instruments of strategic maritime power are enormous and, for most countries, prohibitive, but the UK is now long past that stage.

The Secretary of State has called 2017 the 'Year of the Navy' but, in truth, the opportunities will continue through 2018 and beyond: this is nothing less than a new era of British maritime power.

Conclusion

So, in concluding, if it seems like I have raised more questions than I've answered, then that's intentional because we have the rest of the day to think them through.

But what I hope I have outlined is how the Royal Navy's long awaited renaissance is culminating at the very moment that the United Kingdom must consider its future place in the world.

Where we go from here is a matter equally for diplomats and politicians.

However, the beauty of naval power is that it offers that most precious commodity of all: choice.

And, if the nation chooses, our continued investment in a strong Royal Navy can put us right back at the heart of those majestic circles.

Earlier I quoted De Gaulle, so it seems appropriate that I balance that by ending with words from Winston Churchill, spoken in 1948:

If you think of the 3 interlinked circles you will see that we are the only country which has a great part in every one of them. We stand, in fact, at the very point of junction, and here in this Island at the centre of the seaways and perhaps the airways also, we have the opportunity of joining them all together. If we rise to the occasion in the years that are to come it may be found that once again we hold the key to opening a safe and happy future.