

Speech by Armed Forces Minister at First Sea Lord's Sea Power Conference 2022

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much indeed for inviting me to come and speak today. I know that there was at least one other who would have been invited in front of me and he sends his apologies, but that is the role of the deputy and I am grateful for the opportunity nonetheless, to come and enthuse about all that a retired soldier has learned about the importance of maritime power projection in my time as the Minister for the Armed Forces. And to be invited to do so as the Sir Henry Leach lecture is a real honour and particularly to have Sir Henry's daughter and family in the room.

It would be remiss I think, not to reflect on the fact that this is the 40th anniversary of the Falklands conflict. Sir Henry made his name both as a maritime commander during the Cold War, but also in the advice that he gave around to the use of maritime power in the Falklands. This is a good moment I think to reflect to the Falklands generation of veterans, that, although the news agenda is elsewhere, right now and I think we would probably have all thought when we were looking at the news grids back in and sort of October, November last year that the commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the Falklands would be very high profile and it's not. And I don't want anybody in the wider Royal Navy community to think that that is because our thoughts are not with those who, those eighty-five Royal Navy personnel, twenty-six Royal Marines and eighty Royal Fleet Auxiliary personnel who gave their lives in that conflict. It is an act of great sacrifice. And I think that where there is the parallel is that 40 years ago, the British public knew that the right thing to do was to sail an awfully long way to stand up for the rights and the freedom of Falkland Islanders, and to accept all of the risks that that brought with it. And what we've seen over the last three months is the British public are every bit as resolved to do the right thing, no matter what the risks may be to the United Kingdom. And so whilst the conversation is dominated by Ukraine, I just wanted to open this lecture by making sure that everybody in the Royal Navy community, in the Royal Marines community, knows that absolutely nobody in Her Majesty's Government has forgotten that this is a very important anniversary and that our thoughts and admiration are with all who fought so valiantly on the sea and from the sea, in that conflict.

Now, the other thing that I think Sir Henry would appreciate about the world in which we live today is that we have returned to a period of systemic competition. Now the IR foresaw that and the IR started to re-gear the British Armed Forces to be a set of armed forces that could persistently be present in parts of the world where we are challenged and to compete, but when it was in the IR, it was just words, it was just policy. What's happened over the last year and particularly in the last three months, has brought that into very sharp focus. But I think what's interesting is when you stop

and think about it, in the maritime domain, everything has changed but yet nothing has changed. The UK's geography hasn't changed. We still sit, from the Russian perspective, at the left hand gate post of their routes into the North Atlantic. The Greenland, Iceland, UK gap hasn't changed in its strategic importance. It is still hugely important that you have the ability to protect your fisheries and your oil and gas assets at sea, both in home waters and in the waters of overseas territories, in the waters of allies and partners. And of course, it's hugely important that you can protect to defend your trade routes. Although a big difference since the end of the Cold War, is that the offshoring of manufacturing and the globalisation of supply chains has meant that those sea lines of communication are now even more important to Western economies than they were 30 or 40 years or so ago. So no change in that sense. Geography hasn't changed, the resources of the ocean and of our seas and our requirements protect them hasn't changed, and sea lines of communication for the purposes of trade, no change. But what has changed is the existence of undersea infrastructure and the threat that can be posed against that, that is material to our national security and the existence of our liberalised global economy. 97 per cent and rising of global data travels and cables under the seas and trade worth \$10 trillion per day.

So too, is there a renewed challenge to the rules based international system and with that, the governance and protection of rights on the global commons. And that is not just about how we do our business on the high seas but so too, and this was put into a very sharp focus when I was in the office of Commander of the 5th Fleet in Bahrain, where he was showing me the three pinch points in his patch – the Suez, the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Straits of Hormuz. And you realise that it doesn't take much in the way of maritime power or even indeed in the Navy, missile power, in order to hold at risk and entire global order at certain points of geography around the world.

The other thing that has really changed is the geopolitics of some of the key seas in our near abroad. During the Cold War, the Black Sea had just Turkey as a NATO member, and then Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, as part of the Warsaw Pact, or the Soviet Union. Now it's the complete inverse. Romania, Bulgaria have joined Turkey. Georgia is a NATO aspirant, Ukraine remains we think a NATO aspirant, we'll see how that shifts. Also, Russia stands alone in the Black Sea, where previously it was the opposite way around for NATO. Exactly the same, I think that the geopolitics of the Baltic. In the Cold War, the Baltic was West Germany, Denmark and Norway, in NATO. Sweden and Finland, non-ally, but then the Soviet Union in St. Petersburg, and in Kaliningrad, and then Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and East Germany, around the rest of the coast. Completely inverted if, as looks likely, Finland and Sweden decide to make a bid to join NATO. All of a sudden in the Baltic, St Petersburg's and Kaliningrad stand alone around a coastline that would otherwise be NATO. That's a massive geopolitical shift in two really important European seas. Then there is the change of climate and with that the opening up of a sea route in the high north, and how we will stand up for a rules based international system and freedom of navigation rights, between east and west, across Russia's northern coast. So our interest in the maritime remains enormous, self-evidently so and as an island nation with global ambition, how could it be anything but. But our

competition in our near abroad through NATO, in reacting to changing geopolitics and changing security situation in the Euro-Atlantic is a great challenge for the Navy, for the Fleet Commander and Charlie Stickland, Chief of Joint Operations, is here as well. How does NATO reassure its allies in seas that are now predominantly NATO coastlines, but where a belligerent Russia will seek to challenge. That requires naval resource, that requires a presence. That's a resource and a presence that can be internationalised, but it requires a clear commitment from us to be there, and to stand up for the rights of our NATO partners in those seas.

So too, however, must we not be fixed, I liken it to watching my son play under-tens football, where the style is very much to chase the ball. All 20 players on the pitch are within about 10 yards ball at any one time. And there's a danger that just as last year, on the eve of HMS Queen Elizabeth and her Strike Group sailing, all of the conversation was about the Indo Pacific tilt and the opportunities there, there's a danger that this year, we focus exclusively on sub hunting in the North Atlantic, standing up for our neighbour, for our allies and partners in the Baltic and the Black Sea, competing in the Mediterranean and then everything reverts to being about the Euro-Atlantic. But that would be a massive mistake because we have an obligation as a global trading nation and just because of the nature of modern competition between states, to also compete for influence, prosperity and to protect our friendships in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, South- East Asia, South Pacific and the Caribbean.

And it was fortuitous that she was in the right place at the right time but in the South Pacific, take that as an example, about as far away from the UK as you could get but where the UK through the Commonwealth has partnerships and friendships that have lasted decades, but that we have been failing to meaningfully service for decades as well. In fact, we've be relying, I would argue, entirely on the Australians and New Zealanders to carry on flying the flag for the Commonwealth with countries in the South Pacific. Well, how fantastic that literally months after the offshore patrol vessels arrive in the Indo Pacific we have exactly the sorts of moments where the danger was that China would be the first to arrive in Tonga with aid and China becomes the person who helped Tonga in their hour of need. But instead, a Royal Navy offshore patrol vessel was two days sail away because she was forward present, ready to react whatever the situation was. And she was there alongside the Australians and New Zealanders reacting to that moment. I thought that was the most brilliant vindication of why we do forward presence, why we need to operate, why we need to be constantly recognising that we are in a competition, and that point of competition changes all the time from the humanitarian, to the opportunity to develop capability together and to share aligned inventories and ways of operating all the way through to the more hard edged competition that is the business of naval power.

I think the case for naval power is clear, obviously, I've eulogised already about the threats from the sea and our opportunities around the world. But the challenge is what sort and how much of it. Now I was warned passionately, strongly, by every sailor I've spoken to – do not read anything into the Moskva because they will start telling you about the position that the radars

were in at the time that it was hit and that therefore, crew error, so I won't. I also phoned up Ben yesterday morning and alongside that warning, I said yeah, but why is everything constantly bigger? Why is a destroyer now the size of a cruiser and why is a frigate now the size of a destroyer? Why is the answer to everything in the naval world, what you need minister is bigger and more expensive. There followed naval architecture 101 around height of mast, beam and therefore length and tonnage. So I sort of get that these things are more complicated than a simple former soldier might have initially thought. But I do think there are some realities that we would be failing ourselves if we weren't to challenge ourselves over. Missile technology, on land and at sea, appears to be an ascendant. Industrial base, particularly in the UK, but actually you could argue across the West compared to China, particularly, our industrial base is limited. And supply chains are increasingly challenging and raw materials increasingly expensive. So in those circumstances, surely there is a conversation to be had about a more disruptive approach to maritime power projection. Is the answer really ever bigger ships, ever bigger submarines? Now for what it's worth, this isn't me saying that we've made mistakes or the things we're buying are not right. I think the UK's current fleet and our planned acquisitions over the next decade or two are right. I think that the Carrier Strike Group deployment was a huge success and proof that projection of air power from the maritime remains a hugely persuasive hard tool power that can be projected anywhere in the world. And when you get to that amazing elysian field of interoperability with your key allies as we proved in the Mediterranean and in the Philippine Sea, then it can be a really, really persuasive reminder of those who seek to challenge the rules based international system, just how much power can be brought quickly to bear against them on a sovereign piece of territory that can self-propel anywhere in the world.

But I'm interested in how we put alongside that Carrier Strike Group vision, and these amazing destroyers and frigates that we will buy over the next decades, a dispensable, dispersible, autonomous capability that makes the challenge for our adversaries even harder, that poses them with real dilemmas. I also want to see the Royal Navy lead the way in lethality. I thought that Andrew's predecessor Jerry Kyd, in his haul-down letter, wrote some really persuasive things about the importance of the lethality. And I think it is quite interesting when the US and the UK send ships into the Barents Sea it is the American DDGs that attract attention because of their lethality and their ability to project power from the maritime to the land domain. Our frigates clearly have an important role in protecting those destroyers so our presence was very necessary. But prickly, more lethal naval platforms that pose adversaries challenge at sea and from the sea to land, I think are conversations that we need be having ourselves and challenging ourselves to get right. I also think that we need to rediscover and all these people with beards who spend their life beneath the ocean or deep in bunkers at Northwood are effusive about this, but we've got to listen to them, that the submarine domain is less well understood than space. And we have to invest in the advantage that you can find beneath the oceans because I continue to believe that it is a place from which you can do all manner of stuff in a way that your adversaries don't get a say in what so ever.

But it's how we operate too. And I think that our competition for relationships, for inventory with partners around the Gulf of Guinea, along the East African coast in the Caribbean, in the Arabian Gulf and in the South Pacific are opportunities to compete to maintain the UK sphere of influence and to push back against the growing Chinese influence, particularly in many parts of the world, but actually Russia is active in many parts of the world too with similar ambitions. And that doesn't mean that we are there as a guarantor of their security. It is that we engage them as partners, as equals without creating debt dependency, without demanding basing rights in return. The deal that we do is that we have a set of values that we espouse, and we have a willingness to have a relationship as equals, that in my experience, when I have seen Royal Navy training teams around the world doing this with our partners in the Commonwealth and beyond, our people just instinctively get it and when they do, it is brilliant. It is powerful. It is wonderful. And it stands in stark contrast to the way that the Chinese do their business with chequebook and stick.

And we mustn't be dismissive. There's a tendency because we did the Carrier Strike Group and it went so well with the Charles de Gaulle and with the Reagan to say that's how we operate, a carrier Navy and that's what matters. Of course we are. But there are a network of patrol boat navies with security challenges in the maritime domain of their own in seas around the world where the white ensign has a place and where British naval expertise is a currency that is hugely admired and where there's an appetite to partner. So I'm every bit as excited about HMS Queen Elizabeth and Prince of Wales as I am HMS Spey, Tamar, Medway, Forth and Trent. And there will be a moment where those switch to be the Type 31s, but I hope that they don't switch completely because in some parts of the world Type 31 is too big. It's over roaring. When you turn up, you're not being a partner, you're being the boss. And so I hope that the Navy strikes a balance between putting Type 31 out in replacement to the batch two OPVs but also in addition to the batch two OPV. So the right platform with the right profile is in the right place, flying the flag for the UK. And for what it's worth since the Secretary of State wasn't available and the speech is mine, the thing that I really interested in is for those patrol boat navies, given the role that we have that is non-discretionary in home waters, how do we, the Royal Navy here in the UK, use a set of smaller simply maintained, highly exportable patrol vessels in our home waters that then have the RN seal of approval for which the export market – and the Secretary of State for International Trade nods enthusiastically – there are dozens of navies in the market to buy that sort of platform. And it would be great if we could operate it in home waters too. As the First Sea Lord said yesterday, all great minister, but it's going to cost you but it's a conversation to have.

Ladies and gentlemen, over the last 18 months or so I had the huge pleasure of seeing the Royal Navy deployed on its Littoral Response Group experimentation deployment into the Mediterranean. I have had the pleasure of sitting in the ops room of a Type 45 destroyer where they have shown me the air picture that they saw as they sailed across the bottom of Crimea. I have stood on offshore patrol vessels in Curaçao, Cartagena and Dhaka. I have stood on minesweepers in Bahrain, I have been on a submarine on the first day

of fresh air after its deployment with our continuous at sea deterrent. I've been in bunkers being briefed on the incredible spooky stuff that our SSNs do day in day out. I have been briefed by frigate and destroyer crews that have been in the high north, the Black Sea, the Baltic and the North Atlantic. The Royal Navy is operating the world over with huge success. It is magnificent, it is ready to fight. The maritime contribution to our national security right now is inescapably important and I am so proud of the work that our men and women who wear dark blue at work are doing. I want them to be busier yet. I want them to continue to be Europe's foremost Navy with a war-fighting capability that makes our adversaries take note. But so too, do I want to see the white ensign flying in all corners of the world as partners to nations big and small, reminding them that in the UK they have a real friend and from the sea we do things best, thank you.