

Speech: First Sea Lord outlines the Royal Navy's requirements for the Type 31e frigate

Minister, ladies and gentlemen, it's a pleasure to speak to you today, in the midst of a hugely exciting few weeks for the Royal Navy and the UK's maritime industrial sector.

As the minister mentioned, when HMS Queen Elizabeth arrived in Portsmouth last month, I described it as a triumph of strategic ambition and a lesson for the future, and I really meant it.

Here was a project first initiated 20 years ago, in which time it outlasted 3 prime ministers, 8 defence secretaries and 7 First Sea Lords. It survived 5 general elections, 3 defence reviews and more planning rounds than I care to remember.

But despite all these twists and turns, the project endured and, in doing so proved to the world, and to ourselves, that we still have what it takes to be a great maritime industrial nation.

Now, in the [National Shipbuilding Strategy](#), we have an opportunity to maintain the momentum.

So my reason for being here today is two-fold. Firstly, to outline the Royal Navy's requirement for the Type 31e by describing the kind of ship we're looking for and its place in our future fleet.

Secondly, to emphasise our commitment to working with you, our industry partners, to build on what we've achieved with the Queen Elizabeth class, and to bring about a stronger and more dynamic shipbuilding sector which can continue to prosper and grow in the years ahead.

Requirement

The Royal Navy's requirement for a general purpose frigate is, in the first instance, driven by the government's commitment to maintain our current force of 19 frigates and destroyers.

The 6 Type 45 destroyers are still new in service, but our 13 Type 23 frigates are already serving beyond their original design life.

They remain capable, but to extend their lives any further is no longer viable from either an economic or an operational perspective.

Eight of those Type 23s are specifically equipped for anti-submarine warfare and these will be replaced on a one-for-one basis by the new Type 26 frigate.

As such, we look to the Type 31e to replace the remaining 5 remaining general

purpose variants.

This immediately gives you an idea of both the urgency with which we view this project, and how it fits within our future fleet.

In order to continue meeting our current commitments, we need the Type 31e to fulfil routine tasks to free up the more complex Type 45 destroyers and Type 26 frigates for their specialist combat roles in support of the strategic nuclear deterrent and as part of the carrier strike group.

So although capable of handling itself in a fight, the Type 31e will be geared toward maritime security and defence engagement, including the fleet ready escort role at home, our fixed tasks in the South Atlantic, the Caribbean and the Gulf, and our NATO commitments.

These missions shape our requirements.

There is more detail in your handout but, broadly speaking, the Type 31e will need a hanger and flight deck for both a small helicopter and unmanned air vehicle, accommodation to augment the ship's company with a variety of mission specialists as required, together with stowage for sea boats, disaster relief stores and other specialist equipment.

It will be operated by a core ships company of between 80-100 men and women and it needs to be sufficiently flexible to incorporate future developments in technology, including unmanned systems and novel weaponry as they come to the fore, so open architecture and modularity are a must.

All this points towards a credible, versatile frigate, capable of independent and sustained global operations.

Now I want to be absolutely clear about what constitutes a frigate in the eyes of the Royal Navy.

In Nelson's time, a first rate ship like HMS Victory was a relative scarcity compared with smaller, more lightly armed frigates.

They wouldn't take their place in the line of battle, but they were fast, manoeuvrable and flew the White Ensign in many of the far flung corners of the world where the UK had vital interests.

More recently, the navy I joined still had general purpose frigates like the Leander, Rothesay and Tribal class and, later, the Type 21s, which picked up many of the routine patrol tasks and allowed the specialist ASW frigates to focus on their core NATO role.

It was only when defence reductions at the end of the Cold War brought difficult choices that we moved to an all high end force.

So forgive the history lesson, but the point I'm making is the advent of a mixed force of Type 31 and Type 26 frigates is not a new departure for the Royal Navy, nor is it a 'race to the bottom'; rather it marks a return to the concept of a balanced fleet.

And the Type 31e is not going to be a glorified patrol vessel or a cut price corvette. It's going to be, as it needs to be, a credible frigate that reflects the time honoured standards and traditions of the Royal Navy.

Ambition

In order to maintain our current force levels, the first Type 31e must enter service as the as the first general purpose Type 23, HMS Argyll, leaves service in 2023.

Clearly that's a demanding timescale, which means the development stage must be undertaken more quickly than for any comparable ship since the Second World War.

But while this programme may be initially focused on our requirements for the 2020s, we must also look to the 2030s and beyond.

You know how busy the Royal Navy is and I won't labour the point, suffice to say international security is becoming more challenging, threats are multiplying and demands on the navy are growing.

Added to this is that, as we leave the European Union, the UK is looking to forge new trading partnerships around the world.

Put simply, Global Britain needs a global Navy to match.

It is therefore significant that the government has stated in its manifesto, and again through the National Shipbuilding Strategy, that it views the Type 31e as a means to grow the overall size of the Royal Navy by the 2030s.

If we can deliver a larger fleet, then we can strengthen and potentially expand the Royal Navy's reach to provide the kind of long term presence upon which military and trading alliances are built.

Delivery

This is a hugely exciting prospect, but we must first master the basics.

We can all think of examples of recent projects which have begun with the right intentions, only for timescales to slip, requirements to change and costs to soar.

As Sir John Parker highlighted in his report last year, we end up with a vicious cycle where fewer, more expensive, ships enter service late, and older ships are retained well beyond their sell by date and become increasingly expensive to maintain.

So we need to develop the Type 31e differently if we're going to break out of that cycle.

We've said that the unit price must not exceed £250 million.

For the Royal Navy, this means taking a hard-headed, approach in setting our

requirements to keep costs down, while maintaining a credible capability, and then having the discipline to stick to those requirements to allow the project to proceed at pace.

It also means playing our part to help win work for the UK shipbuilding sector from overseas.

So the challenge is to produce a design which is credible, affordable and exportable.

Adaptability is key, we need a design based on common standards, but which offers different customers the ability to specify different configurations and capabilities without the need for significant revisions.

So while it may be necessary to make trade offs in the name of competitiveness, export success means longer production runs, greater economies of scale and lower unit costs, and therein lies the opportunity to increase the size of the Royal Navy.

With a growing fleet it would be perfectly possible for the Royal Navy to forward deploy Type 31e frigates to places like Bahrain Singapore and the South Atlantic, just as we do with some of our smaller vessels today.

If our partners in these regions were to buy or build their own variants, then we could further reduce costs through shared support solutions and common training.

And because of the Royal Navy's own reputation as a trusted supplier of second hand warships, we could look to sell our own Type 31's at the midpoint of their lives and reinvest the savings into follow-on batches.

So by bringing the Royal Navy's requirements in line with the demands of the export market, we have the opportunity to replace the vicious circle with a virtuous one.

And beyond the Type 31e, the benefits could apply to the Royal Navy's longer term requirements, beginning with the fleet solid support ship but also including our future amphibious shipping and eventually the replacement for the Type 45 destroyers as well as other projects that may emerge.

Ultimately, the prize is a more competitive and resilient industrial capacity: one that is better able to withstand short term political and economic tides and can serve the Royal Navy's long term needs.

Conclusion

So, in drawing to a close, I believe we have a precious opportunity before us.

My father worked at the Cammell Laird shipyard for over 40 years. It was visiting him there as a schoolboy and seeing new ships and submarines taking shape that provided one of the key inspirations for me to join the Royal Navy, nearly 40 years ago.

And yet, for most of my career, the fleet has become progressively smaller while the UK shipbuilding sector contracted to such an extent that it reached the margins of sustainability.

But with the Queen Elizabeth class carriers, and the 6 yards involved in their build, we demonstrated that shipbuilding has the potential to be a great British success story once again.

Far beyond Rosyth, we've seen green shoots emerging in shipbuilding across the country, and throughout the supply chain, driven by a new entrepreneurial ambition.

Now the National Shipbuilding Strategy has charted a bold and ambitious plan to capitalise on that and reverse the decline.

And in the Type 31e, we have the chance to develop a ship that can support our national security and our economic prosperity in the decades to come.

The navy is ready and willing.

Now we look to you, our partners in industry, to bring your expertise, your innovation and your ambition to bear in this endeavour.