



Comment

Britain's naval decline and NATO maritime security

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Introduction

Britain's national security will be undermined over the next decade because the number of surface warships possessed by the Royal Navy will decline to levels well below those deployed a decade ago, according to an independent study: [Why things don't happen – silent principles of national security](#), Jeremy Blackham and Gwyn Prins, *RUSI Journal* August/September 2010, Vol.155 No.4 pp14-22. NATO Watch Associate, Carlo de Hennin, reviews the study in the context of NATO maritime security.

Vice-Admiral Sir Blackham's and Professor Prins's article is most opportune. The authors focus on British national security in the larger context of global maritime security. Their views on the consequences of a globalised and increasingly interdependent world mirror many of the concerns of former professor at the US Naval War College, Thomas Barnett, as set out in his 2006 study, [The Pentagon's new map and Blueprint for action](#). To some extent, the British authors' conclusions are rather frightening, not least because they raise a number of pertinent strategic questions:

- Is the situation similar in other European navies?
- Does this bear any impact on NATO's naval forces, given that NATO's naval forces are the sum of national navies?
- Are we getting maritime security strategy right, at the national, EU and NATO levels?
- Are European national maritime security policies in synch and do they match EU and NATO's maritime security strategies?



Answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this comment, which merely echoes the concern of Blackham, Prins and Barnett, and raises a non rhetorical question as to whether sufficient attention is being given to these issues.

In particular, the British study indicates that both NATO and EU maritime security strategy [and shouldn't that strategy be the same ?] may, for the

time being, be flawed. The Wise Pen final report of April 2010, [Maritime Surveillance in Support of CSDP](#), drafted by Vice-Admiral Feldt *et alia* comes to a similar, be it less outspoken, conclusion, through other indicators. One of those indicators is that the Japanese navy intends to operate from Djibouti in order to assure the safety of Japanese merchantmen, or merchantmen that carry cargo to or from Japan – despite the existing presence of the EU Naval Force ([EUNAVFOR](#)) and US vessels in the Gulf of Aden. So, why the need for a Japanese naval presence as well?¹ Could it be because EUNAVFOR does not have sufficient naval means to assure security in the maritime corridors, as [recent acts of piracy](#) in the last weeks have shown? Certainly, [Operation Atlanta](#) and the maritime aspects of [Operation Enduring Freedom](#) score some successes, after initial hesitations about rules of engagement and especially the still to be settled judicial approach—both problems a result of a lack of strategic planning. And the fight against piracy is still far from won, in part due to an insufficient naval presence. As the British authors state: countries like Australia and India understood the need for a strong naval presence and are expanding their surface fleets accordingly.

These indicators, as well as the article, trigger the question about the validity of Western maritime security strategy and point towards the need for a rethink – both at the national level within key NATO maritime states (in terms of the adequacy of naval commissioning and decommissioning) and in terms of the role that the EU and NATO should play in the shaping this strategy. In NATO in particular, the need for a rethink of maritime strategy (much as it is currently doing in relation to nuclear strategy) is overdue, and would provide an opportunity to work with the EU to streamline and harmonise thinking and operational practice. Whether NATO and the EU should continue being two different instruments for implementing an identical or vastly similar strategic maritime approach should be one question

¹ Whether this presence is in accordance with Japan's constitution remains a matter of debate for jurists

that dominates any rethink. Given the already existing and regularly voiced concerns about the need to avoid overlap between the EU and NATO (see, for example, [NATO's European Dimension](#), SDA Report, August 2010) one option would be for either the EU or



NATO to assume operational responsibility for maritime security in its entirety. This could avoid situations where both NATO and the EU operate naval forces in the same theatre under different mandates, as is presently the case in the Gulf of Aden.

(Photo credits: NATO)