

A Commonwealth Naval Strategy in the 21st Century?

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Cet article examine le rôle potentiel et les buts des marines du Commonwealth à l'ère de la mondialisation. Il s'agit en partie d'une question de reconnaître les menaces que l'on doit contrer, mais la tâche centrale est la défense collective du système commercial international sur lequel dépendent la paix et la prospérité du monde. Cependant, dans quelle mesure, peut-on, et doit-on, donner précedence aux nouvelles tâches telles la sécurité maritime, la prévention des conflits et la dissuasion, la stabilisation et l'assistance humanitaire par rapport aux missions traditionnelles de défense des intérêts nationaux? Il est clair que ce sera une question de trouver un équilibre entre les deux, mais ceci pose une série de défis. La fin de ce document cherche à déterminer si les marines du Commonwealth ont des avantages particuliers à s'impliquer dans la défense collective du système marchand et détient, peut-être, quelque chose de distinctif à offrir.

Does the Commonwealth have anything distinctive to offer towards the resolution of the world's maritime problems? The question is simple enough, the answer complicated. First, we need to sketch in some of the most striking features of the relevant context in which strategists need to operate and to which any suggested maritime strategy needs to respond. The use of the word relevant is a reminder for sailors and their advocates that there may well be some parts of the strategic context in which maritime power may not be particularly apposite, hard though that that might be to imagine. Having reviewed the maritime problems arising from this brief survey, we will then move on to the issue of whether the Commonwealth can help resolve them.

Globalisation and its Challenges

Over 95 percent of the world's trade by volume is conducted by sea¹, and that volume has hugely expanded over the past 30 years or so, from 2.6 billion tons of goods

¹ This figure of 95 percent – or 90 percent – is frequently quoted. A recent study by Lloyd's Maritime Intelligence Unit of the 2006 UN trade data for more than 1000 commodities, concludes that only 75 percent of global merchandise trade by volume and 59 percent by value is transported by ships. See Shashi Kumar, "US Merchant Marine and World Maritime Review," USNI *Proceedings* (May 2010), 102.

in 1970 to 7.12 billion tons in 2005. In 2005 the world merchant fleet grew by 7.2 percent over the 2004 total to 960 million deadweight tons.² Nor despite the recent recession does there appear to be much doubt amongst the experts that the increase in the world's population and its growing aspirations will require such long-term trends to continue, at least while the resources required to sustain them are available.

Seaborne commerce produces a tight, mutually dependent, cooperative community of industrial production and consumption – a system, its advocates claim, from which most of the world benefits, though not necessarily to the same degree. But a system also that is completely dependent on, and indeed an incentive for, regional peace and the continued security of shipping.

Accordingly it is, as Mahan reminded us, a global sea-based trading system that remains acutely vulnerable to a range of threats and challenges:

This, with the vast increase in rapidity of communication, has multiplied and strengthened the bonds knitting together the interests of nations to one another, till the whole now forms an articulated system not only of prodigious size and activity, but of excessive sensitiveness, unequalled in former ages.³

The things that threaten the system by endangering trade and, importantly, the conditions for trade include:

- Contradictions inherent in the system, such as those that have caused difficulties from 2007. Grotesque imbalances in the effects of the system could undermine its stability too.
- Disorder ashore and at sea in areas that produce crucial commodities or through which critical transportation routes run.
- Inter-state war. The disruptions to the world economy that a US-China conflict over Taiwan would have are unimaginable.
- Attack by forces, both state and non-state, hostile to the intentions, values and outcomes of globalization.
- Global catastrophe. Extreme consequences of climate change or health pandemics could also undermine the system.

These threats and risks may well prove inter-related; military responses of any sort, may not be appropriate to their resolution of course, but in many of them they may well have a useful role to play. Accordingly, Mahan urged the establishment of a community of interests and righteous ideals to defend the system.⁴ Because the system is sea-based, defending it implies action at and from the sea to secure trade, and more importantly the conditions ashore which make trade possible. If the seas are not secure, then nothing else will be.

The Commonwealth would be affected by all this, as most of its members are

² UN Conference on Trade and Development (2006), 5, x.

³ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Retrospect and Prospect* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, 1902), 144.

⁴ Mahan, *Retrospect and Prospect*, 177-8

deeply embedded in the global trading system. Its members feature highly in the A.T. Kearney index of world globalization – particularly the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore [which consistently comes top] and of course Canada itself which came 6th in 2006 and 8th in 2007.⁵ What happens in distant parts of the world, sooner or later affects all of its members in one way or another, and often to a much greater extent than it does most other countries. Much of the Commonwealth's dependence on fishing⁶ and/or sea-based trade means that its members have every incentive to help defend the system.

Clearly, 'defending the system' involves far more than a set of enlightened military responses. Social, economic and, increasingly, environmental considerations come into play here.⁷ A two-fold strategic imperative emerges. The first part of it is to encourage collective action in defence of common interests where comparatively low-level threats such as pirates, disorder at sea and in the littorals, international terrorism and so forth are concerned. And the second is to deter and prevent war and other forms of international conflict.

At the moment, though, around the world there is a particular focus on the threat posed by international terrorism, and a major effort to defend what is essentially a maritime system on land. People point out that Al-Qaeda's attack on the World Trade Towers was no coincidence, and the operation in Afghanistan was justified by this perception. But this leads onto the second contextual point.

Recession and an increasingly Post-Modern Western Distaste for Close and Long Encounters

Many discern a growing disinclination to get involved in future Afghanistans on the basis that, while this must be resolved satisfactorily, this is not the sort of war we should be fighting, because it suits our adversaries more than us. Our own essential characteristics – a free media (able to report every mistake and every failure), the law (which in Afghanistan constrains the lawful much more than the unlawful), the western aversion to casualties, limited supplies of really committed manpower, and 24-hour democratic horizons which militate against sustainable long-term strategies all necessarily disadvantage us, and limit our capacity to get what we want. Good strategy is about making the best use of one's advantages, and denying an adversary the capacity to

⁵ "The Globalization Index," *Foreign Policy* (Nov/Dec 2007).

⁶ The marine effects of environmental change are described in *Global: the International Briefing* Issue 1, (November 2009), 10, 16, 18. For Commonwealth dependence on fisheries, see "Ways to save island nations' fisheries," in "The Globalization Index," *op. cit.*, 81, 87; and Commonwealth Secretariat, "Three pacific countries stake claim to 600,00 sq km of seabed," 12 April 2010 at: <http://www.the-commonwealth.org/news/222386/12041seabed-unsubmission.htm>, accessed 10 May 2010.

⁷ New Zealand's Mike Moore identifies the leading socio-economic and environmental aspects of the system urgently needing for reform, in *Saving Capitalism: Why Globalisation and Democracy offer the Best Hope for Progress, Peace and Development* (Singapore: John Wiley, 2009), 259-267.

do the same. In a counter-insurgency situation, this is extremely difficult. Worse, our presence can often seem to be counter-productive, more part of the problem than the solution, especially when, to the locals, our presence seems to take the form of inaccurate air-strikes based on faulty intelligence which kill or injure innocent civilians. The longer garrisoning forces stay in such places, the worse this gets.

This isn't to say there is, or should be, a momentum to 'cut and run' but it does suggest a likely disinclination to get involved in the same kind of thing again in the near future if at all possible. The costs (human, financial and political) of such a strategy, when compared to its effects, for sceptics at least, seem increasingly hard for governments and publics struggling with the consequences of the recession to bear, especially at a time when success is hard to measure and the recession has hit defence spending quite hard.⁸

In consequence, although the immediate demands of the Afghanistan campaign were widely regarded as 'the main effort' by those countries engaged in it, there may in the longer term be a greater readiness to investigate less costly, less expensive and less risky sea-based strategies which aim above all at preventing conflict and deterring war, pro-actively.

Preventing conflicts is much cheaper and much better than winning them when they happen and then engaging in long-term repair work afterwards. Today's soft-end conflict prevention averts tomorrow's expensive reactions. Naval forces tend to be especially good at prevention and stabilization partly because of their inherent characteristics; they are flexible, reasonably fast, have little dependence on vulnerable shore-based facilities, and their long-term presence is less politically intrusive and susceptible to attack than land-based equivalents. Moreover the world's littorals are where most people live and most of the world's de-stabilizing problems can be found. As current difficulties in the Gulfs of Guinea and Aden both show, instability ashore and instability in local waters tend to be strongly correlated.

The prevention of war, and helping to defend the system against the various threats and challenges that confront it, requires the adoption of a pro-active rather than a reactive stance. This requires the Alliance to be there, wherever 'there' is, before things go bad, not respond rapidly once they have. It's a strategy of engagement and presence in areas of importance for humanitarian purposes and for reasons of trade, resources or general security. Maritime forces need to be part of the scenery in all areas of particular concern, helping (in the American phrase) to massage the environment 'in a nice way' – to influence events, help to stop them going bad, monitor what is going on, provide early warning that something more serious may need to be done,⁹ and to help build local

⁸ Alex P Schmid and Rashmi Singh provide a good review of this issue in their "Measuring Success and Failure in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: US Government metrics of the Global war on Terror," in Alex P Schmid and Garry F Hindle (eds.), *After the War on Terror: Regional and Multilateral Perspectives on Counter-Terrorism Strategy* (London: RUSI Books, 2009), 33-61.

⁹ Daniel Goure and Rebecca Grant, "US Naval Options for Influencing Iran," *US Naval War College Review* 62: 4 (Autumn 2009) is a useful, if particular, application of such thinking.

capacities to do what does need to be done. It is hard to exaggerate the importance of both presence and the building of local capacity since this lessens the need for, and possible scope of, military intervention.

The deterrence of state-based attack remains an important part of conflict prevention. Most nations put their own national security at the top of the defence agenda and recognise state-level attack as potentially the most serious threat they face. At the same time, their response in the shape of the maintenance of high-grade defences also makes state-based threats, they hope, the least likely. Secure nations then turn to the defence of their wider interests. In this sense the 'defence of the state' is a pre-condition for, not an alternative to, 'the defence of the system'. This nation-based approach certainly seems to be the emphasis in the Asia-Pacific Region

Asia's Rise and the End of Western Ascendancy

Although this phenomenon is often over-hyped, Asia's rise and the end of the idea of Western ascendancy is, nonetheless, a major feature of today's and, more significantly, tomorrow's world. Economic developments have been most responsible for this shift. Compared to the US or Europe the Asia-Pacific region in general and China in particular appear to have survived the 2007-2009 recession in much better shape than either the US or Europe, and indeed China has recently over-taken Germany as the world's largest exporter.¹⁰ The increased visibility of the G20 rather than the G8 in the resolution of the recession is clear evidence of this.¹¹

This seminal shift in the balance of the world's affairs is especially marked in the maritime sphere, both commercial and naval. Although the Chinese re-discovery of the critical importance of the sea is the most marked, much the same can be said of India, Japan and the rest of the Asia-Pacific too. The percentage of the GDP of East Asia that derived from international sea-based trade rose from 47 percent in 1990 to 87 percent in 2006.¹² The raw energy of the new centres of industrial production in China are balanced by the more sophisticated marine services industries of Hong Kong and Singapore, places which still see a slow drift of European expertise out to these areas.

The article emphasizes the value of naval forces for such operations but makes the point that "It is important that the U.S. government articulate the general strategy and purpose behind its long-term force deployment plans. Also, the United States should make explicit the kinds of conditions that would alter those plans," 19.

¹⁰ "China's trade figures bounce back from crisis," *The Straits Times*, 11 January 2010.

¹¹ For an introduction to this Asia-Rising debate see, Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York, Public Affairs, 2008), and Martin Jacques, *When China rules the World* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 409-413. A corrective is provided by Minxin Pei, "Think Again: Asia's Rise," *Foreign Policy* (22 June 2009). A realist perspective on the possible consequences of this is found in Hugh White, "The geo-strategic implications of China's growth," in Ross Garnaut and Lignag Song (eds.), *China's New Place in a World of Crisis* (Canberra: ANU E-Press, 2009).

¹² World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2008* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2008), 317.

Historically, growth in GDP is strongly correlated with naval expenditure and, given the maritime basis of much of that growth, it is perhaps hardly surprising that this is also an area seeing remarkable growth in the size, composition and operational aspiration of local fleets. For the first time in 400 years, the East will be spending more on its navies than is the 'old' West – a truly momentous development. As a result of such trends, no less than 8 of the world's 21 biggest navies in tonnage terms come from the Asia Pacific (excluding, significantly, the two Pacific states, Russia and the United States). This surge in naval spending is especially marked again in China, not least in recognition by that country and the region more widely that the sea has become ever more important.

The emerging naval balance between the United States and China is critical to the strategic future of the Asia-Pacific region, provides the framework for strategic planning around this vast area and aptly illustrates the whole more general 'Asia-Rising' debate. But, so what – does it matter? Three responses are possible.

First, some, leaning on the power transition theory in international relations, would argue that historically challenges to the established strategic order have often been accompanied by inter-state conflict, with the First and Second World Wars being the obvious example. Because of its growing and absolute dependence on overseas commodities, energy and markets, China, like the rest of the Asia-Pacific region, has little choice but to become more maritime in its orientation. Almost inevitably it is developing more ambitious naval forces, and even more significantly, the maritime industries that historically tend to go with it. Almost equally inevitably, these will challenge the strategic primacy of the United States in a geographic area hitherto dominated by American naval power; as such this momentous development could easily degenerate into the levels of competition and conflict that have until now often characterised great changes in the relative power of great states.¹³ The conclusion? The United States, its allies and all other interested parties should at least 'hedge' against such possibilities.

A second response might be to argue that the Britain-to-the United States 'transition' of the 1940s showed that such seismic events need not be accompanied by conflict provided they are sensitively handled, especially when the challenger like contemporary China purports to be a different kind of state, peacefully and harmoniously rising without threatening anyone else. After all, China and indeed all the states of the Asia-Pacific, have as much interest in 'maintaining the system' as anyone else. Here the aim for the rest of the world may be to encourage China to assume its responsibilities in defending the system. There is also an interesting alternate take to this argument – namely that simplistic narratives of China's rise take insufficient account of the economic, social and environmental challenges the country faces (which is why it has so great a stake in the efficiency of the world's trading system). The greatest threat to that system may be China's weaknesses not its strengths, and the interest of the rest of the world is to help China overcome them.

Thirdly, there is the argument that the naval rise of the Asia-Pacific does not

¹³ For the dangers of such 'power transition', see Steve Chan "Exploring Puzzles in Power-transition Theory: Implications for Sino-American relations," *Security Studies* 13:3, 103-141.

matter, largely because accounts of it and the end of Western and specifically American ascendancy are much exaggerated. This warrants more extensive treatment. Clearly in terms of overall defence spending and the current qualitative and quantitative correlation of forces, the US is well ahead. In the hey-day of its global power, the Royal Navy could sometimes achieve a two-power standard, that is, its forces were equivalent to the fleets of its next two rivals combined. In aggregate tonnage terms, the US Navy has something like a 13-power standard and of course the huge advantage of many decades of 24/7 oceanic operations.¹⁴

But this is not how it is necessarily seen in the Pentagon, where anxious planners point at the ‘distributed’ nature of its commitments which require a corresponding diffusion of its assets. As a result of its diversity of missions, US Navy planners have to prepare for a variety of asymmetric techno-tactical anti-access strategies ranging from terrorists on jet-skis to the anti-ship ballistic missile strategies of the Chinese.¹⁵ The need for the US Navy to maintain a significant and simultaneous presence in the very different conditions pertaining to the Western Pacific, the Indian Ocean, the Gulf and Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, and to some extent the Atlantic theatres of operation adds to their problem of diffusion. This all makes it extremely difficult for it actually to assemble that concentration of force that Mahan advocated so strongly. This in turn reduces the apparent inferiority of lesser navies that are less subject to the centrifugal effects of global coverage, and suggest that US margins of superiority at what turns out to be the decisive point could be a good deal closer than a look at raw numbers of platforms and capabilities would suggest. Moreover, prospective adversaries from China to Iran show every sign of seeking to maximise the US Navy’s difficulty.

And then there is the question not so much of the current naval balance as of its future trajectory. Many contend that the US Navy’s target of 313 ships is likely to prove unaffordable, especially given the United States’ debt problems and increasing expectations for social welfare spending.¹⁶ Moreover, as many commentators have pointed out, the existing force level of 280 ships is the smallest since 1916. Finally, the United States’ capacity to stay in the maritime lead is conditioned by its industrial capacity to produce the necessary equipment but “[F]or the first time since 1890... the US Navy is faced with the prospect of competing against a potentially hostile naval power possessing a ship-building capacity that is equal to if not superior, to its own”¹⁷ – in some respects at least.

¹⁴ Robert O. Work, *The US Navy: Charting a Course for Tomorrow’s Fleet* (Washington: CSBA, 2008), 7-12.

¹⁵ Sam Tangredi, *Futures of War: Towards a Consensus View of the Future Security Environment* (Newport RI: Alidade Press, 2008), 105-7. Andrew S Erickson and David D. Yang, “Using the Land to Control the Sea: Chinese Analysts Consider the Antiship Ballistic Missile,” and Eric Hagt and Mathew Durnin, “China’s Antiship Ballistic Missile: Developments and Missing Links,” both in *Naval War College Review* 62:4 (Autumn 2009), 53-86 and 87-116 respectively.

¹⁶ Work, *Charting a Course for Tomorrow’s Fleet*, 14 ff.

¹⁷ Work, *Charting a Course for Tomorrow’s Fleet*, 71.

All three interpretations of this prospective seismic shift in the world's balance of comparative power argue for greatly increased future US preoccupations with the outcome of events – especially maritime ones – in the Asia-Pacific. The nature of these preoccupations may range from seeking to preserve the balance with China, to more general concerns to help keep the peace between China and other increasingly maritime countries in the region, such as Japan, Korea and India. Either way, it seems clear that the United States will need to devote greater maritime effort and resources to the Asia-Pacific and less will be available elsewhere. There seems little doubt of this, although we may not be able to predict the exact nature and extent of these American preoccupations, the future being another country.

Though A Glass Darkly

The editor of one review of the possible 'futures of war' recently quoted R.B. Haldane: "This is my prediction for the future – whatever hasn't happened will happen and no-one will be safe from it." He went on to conclude that "in the dynamic security environment, an assessment of the future is truly only as valuable as its facility for being up-dated."¹⁸ It is always difficult to sketch out the future that defence planners need to prepare for but never more so than now, since in addition to the usual sets of challenges to do with the rise and fall of nations and the deadly quarrels so often associated with it (which may well be hugely exacerbated by the perfect storm of shortages in energy, food and water foreseen by some for the 2030s), we also have to grapple with a range of asymmetrical threats from a variety of non-state actors including terrorists and pirates. And then there are the faceless threats and challenges brought about by climate change – such as the increased propensity for catastrophic weather events or the rising importance of the increasingly ice-free waters of the high North, each of which could have both a direct and an indirect impact on alliance security. To paraphrase Viscount Haldane, if you believe defence analysts, nothing is safe. Because that does seem to be the way it is, it is extremely hard to identify capabilities that can be cut safely, but at the same time we all realise that individual countries simply cannot do everything pessimistic planners might consider essential. As Paul Kennedy has wisely said:

...scrapping and obliterating what seems, at present operationally irrelevant would be the height of folly. We simply have no idea what the demands upon us will be in ten years time.¹⁹

For the United States, and for most navies in the area and elsewhere too, this illustrates an emerging dilemma of the balance they should strike in their defence preparations between traditional and non-traditional threats, and between the hi- and lo-intensity capabilities they are commonly held to require. This dilemma is being played out in the doctrinal formulations and orders of battle of navies around the world.

In particular, to what extent should the prospects of inter-state war shape defence planning in a globalised world? Certainly in the Asia-Pacific the general consensus is

¹⁸ Tangredi, *Futures of War*, 145 and 59.

¹⁹ Paul Kennedy, "History, Politics and Maritime Power," *RUSI Journal*, June 2004.

that its navies should seek to maintain the appropriate high-intensity capabilities to help deter inter-state war. But there are two problems with this. The first is the inability to prove that this investment in high-intensity capability is cost-effective. You cannot prove a negative. The second is that you particularly cannot prove it in advance. The relentless march of technology means we have to prepare today for possible conflicts 20, 30, 40 years ahead, and no one can be expected to predict exactly how what we do today will play out in the long-term future. But in a future world of climate change, gross shortages in energy, food and water, and of major changes in the world's future military balance, it seems better to be safe than sorry. Or at least as safe against interstate threats as we can be, with the resources available.

High-intensity capabilities provide a bonus, on top of their main role. They provide a good deal of the military credibility that underpins political influence. Because in many, but not all, situations short of all-out war they offer higher levels of protection for friendly forces, and precision against unfriendly ones, they reduce the prospect of untoward loss of life; they increase the confidence of statesmen and undermine the confidence of our adversaries.

The attack by Hezbollah on the Israeli corvette *Hanit* with an Iranian C-802 missile shows how the proliferation of modern weaponry – even to non-state actors – can threaten access. Alliance naval forces now face a range of such technologies from the anti-ship ballistic missiles of the Chinese at one end of the spectrum to the fabled suicide bomber on jet skis at the other. Coping with this demands technologically demanding standards of response, usually associated with the capacity to conduct high-intensity operations.

But alongside all this, there is the need to respond to lesser and in the main non-traditional forms of threat such as natural disasters, international terrorism weapons proliferation and all forms of maritime disorder. Although amphibious warfare ships have demonstrated huge utility in disaster relief, it does not follow that forces especially designed to cope with these kinds of generally low-intensity threats can necessarily cope with high-intensity situations. Typically, lower-intensity operations call for navies to strike a different quantity/quality balance, since numbers of platforms tend to matter more when dealing with issues such as piracy and human trafficking.

So Where Might the Commonwealth Come in to all this?

1. Sharing the Burden

The need to manage all these traditional state-centric and non-traditional, system-centric maritime threats to the world's peace and prosperity has to a large extent fallen to the US Navy, as even Kishore Mabubani admits:

The real reason why most international waterways remain safe and open – and thereby facilitate the huge explosion of global trade we have seen – is that the American Navy acts as the guarantor of last resort to keep them open. Without the global presence of the US Navy, our world order would

be less orderly.²⁰

A future US Navy forced to focus more on maintaining the balance and the peace in the Asia-Pacific, and so perhaps less capable of performing its system defence role, may need to compensate for this by even more of a stress on naval engagement with regional allies and partners than it does already. The US Navy's new maritime strategy, *A Co-operative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*²¹ is expressly designed to encourage just this. And obviously, the Commonwealth still contains some of the most useful of the world's other navies. Moreover, the interest of its members in defending the system means they have every incentive to cooperate.

And these are navies that generally fit together easily. They enjoy a common heritage and share many values, and their doctrinal formulations tend to echo each other,²² and they have generally unimpeded access to the force-multiplier effects offered by access to NATO standards, communication systems and procedures, command structures, exercises, staff talks and exchanges, and so forth. They are increasingly well used to operating together, whether in bi-laterals or multi-laterals such as the Five Power Defence Agreement or the various task forces operating in and around the Somali basin and the Gulf. These are regular events that maintain connections, build capacity, explore and develop command experience, and provide the flow of information that keeps navies up to the mark.²³

Despite the universal bid, especially at this post-recessionary time, to build and protect indigenous defence industry, the countries of the Commonwealth have moved in weapons and sensor acquisition from dependence, through independence to inter-dependence in an increasingly globalised arms market. Their ship, sensor and weapons acquisition programmes are linked by an invisible nexus of common technological and defence-industrial economic interest. All their navies face the same dilemmas of choice between quantity and quality, between high and low intensity capabilities, between the

²⁰ Mahbubani, *New Asian Hemisphere*, 105.

²¹ General James T. Conway, Admiral Gary Roughead, and Admiral Thad W. Allen, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* (Washington: Department of the Navy, 2007).

²² Comparison of the Royal Navy's *BR 1806: British Maritime Doctrine* 3rd Edition (London: The Stationery office, 2004) with the Indian Navy's *Indian Maritime Doctrine INBR* (Mumbai: Maritime Doctrine and Concept Centre, August 2009) and the Royal Australian Navy's *Australian Maritime Doctrine RAN Doctrine 2010* (Canberra: Seapower Centre, 2010) is instructive in this regard. The Royal Canadian Navy's *Leadmark: The Navy's Strategy for 2020* (Ottawa, 2001), while not doctrine *per se*, drew in part from the earlier second (1999) edition of BR 1806.

²³ The Five Power Defence Agreement of Singapore, Malaysia, New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom is an increasingly successful exemplar of such Commonwealth cooperation, and so, in a different way, is the new Information Fusion Centre, recently established in Singapore. The very hard-pressed Royal Navy still manages the Sembawang oiling facility in Singapore, participates in FPDA, exercises and cooperates with the IFC; it contributed significantly to Singapore's IMDEX gathering in April 2009 with the presence of the LPD HMS *Bulwark* and the LPH HMS *Ocean*.

modern and the post-modern preoccupations they face. It is interesting, for example, to read of the consultations currently going on between the British, Australian and New Zealand navies about the possibilities of cooperation in the procurement of the next generation of Ocean Patrol Vessels / minehunters, in the hope of finding economies of scale.²⁴ Illustrating the same point, in its attempts to reform the defence acquisition process, India has devoted considerable attention to the UK's so-called Bernard Gray report of October 2009, which is considered 'an exemplar on acquisition related reform' that is more appropriate to the Indian situation than, for example, American equivalents.²⁵

2: The Commonwealth: A Reality Check

Attractive though the notion of the Commonwealth providing a framework for the strategy of maritime partnership for the prevention of conflict might be, two difficulties immediately present themselves.

The first is that the Commonwealth has a major image problem; paradoxically the value of this institution is much better appreciated in the developing world (surely the area of main concern) than it is in the older still predominantly Anglo-Saxon countries. In India, Malaysia or in swathes of Africa, opinion polls consistently record much higher levels of support and interest than applies in the UK. Only a third of those polled in Australia and New Zealand would be sad to leave the organization, but double that, two-thirds in Malaysia and India said the same.²⁶ As one New Zealand commentator said in a study by the Royal Commonwealth Society: "Who on earth is interested in the Commonwealth these days – apart from a dwindling band of sentimental royalists, academics specialising in international relations and a handful of weary diplomats who don't have a choice?"²⁷ For evidence of this lack of interest one might cite the fact that the Commonwealth did not rate a mention in the section on soft power in the UK's recent Green Paper on Defence, even given its strong emphasis on the establishment of partnerships.²⁸

And yet, on the face of it, such dismissive attitudes might seem quite bizarre. Their common heritage means, for all their diversity, the countries of the Commonwealth

²⁴ The Royal Navy's Future Surface Combatant programme was formally discussed with both Australia and New Zealand; see "UK, Australia begin talks on future ships," *Jane's Defence Review* 27 January 2010.

²⁵ Raj Shukla, "Acquisition Reform – Lessons from Bernard Gray" (New Delhi: IDSA, 10 November 2009), and Harinder Singh, "Defence Acquisitions: The Question of Systemic Inefficiencies and Effectiveness" (New Delhi: IDSA Comment, 3 December 2009), which argues, "if these provisions are being adopted by the British on whom we have modelled so many of our systems, why can't we do likewise."

²⁶ "Commonwealth Conversation," *Exchange* (London: Royal Commonwealth Society, Issue 03, September-December 2009), 6-8. For a Malaysian account see "Najib: Move away from business-as-usual mode," *New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur), 28 November 2009.

²⁷ Quoted in *New Straits Times* article, *op cit*.

²⁸ *Adaptability and Partnership: Issues for the Strategic Defence Review* (London: Ministry of Defence, February 2010), CM 7794.

have a great deal in common, in the way of shared values and institutions. The notion, for example that India and Singapore should move to a closer relationship would clearly be facilitated by the consequences, for better or worse, of the colonial experience.²⁹

The Commonwealth embraces 2 billion people, from tiny Pacific Ocean states to sub-continent. Its 53 countries conduct 20 percent of world trade and include some of the biggest economies (India, the UK, Singapore) and some of the smallest. Non-British Mozambique and Rwanda have joined the organisation, and other countries in Africa and the Middle East are reportedly expressing interest in associating with it. At its 60th anniversary meeting in Port of Spain, outsiders like UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Danish Prime Minister Loekke Rasmussen thought it worthwhile to join its discussions about climate change. In many cases, the notion of making use of the Commonwealth, rather than neglecting it as a means of contributing to the development of a comprehensive maritime strategy, would seem to be pushing on an open door. Given its potential, the British neglect of the Commonwealth and the connectedly unfocused nature of the British aid programme seems heroically short-sighted; it is truly surprising that only now is this perhaps beginning to be appreciated.³⁰

The second cause for doubt, though, is the notion that other institutions, such as the UN and regional organisations like the African Union or NATO, in which Commonwealth members of course participate, may do the job much better. Regional organisations may have closer proximity to the threats and challenges discussed earlier, and so greater incentives to do something about them. But they frequently suffer from internal political tensions (such as the succession of collective organisations proposed for the Indian Ocean area) or from institutional limitations on their capacity to act such as ASEAN or, even more, the African Union.

NATO on the other hand, for example has the advantage of an effective alliance that actually does things, long experience of multinational naval cooperation, and has now in the words of a recent SACEUR (Supreme Allied Commander in Europe) extended itself more than ever before. “Afghanistan, the Balkans, the Mediterranean Sea, the Horn of Africa – the geographic stretch of NATO operations is the largest in its storied history,” and at least some of its members are looking still further in the current process of “taking a fix and charting a way forward” in order to cope with the challenges of the twenty-first century.³¹ The alliance’s operations in the Somali Basin and Afghanistan illustrate the point.

Accordingly, a more energetic outreach programme has been discussed and

²⁹ Sinderpal Singh and Syeda Sana Rahman, “India-Singapore Relations: Constructing a ‘New’ Bilateral relationship,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 32:1, 84. The more general issue of whether the Colonial experience had redeeming elements, or not, remains highly contentious. Mahbubani, *New Asian Hemisphere*, at least believes it does – see 108, 165 and 264.

³⁰ “Tories to put Commonwealth first and demote China in aid shakeup,” *The Guardian*, 1 January 2010.

³¹ Admiral James Stavridis, Change of Command Speech, *SHAPE Officer’s Association News* 139, March 2009; also Admiral James Stavridis, SACEUR in “NATO: Taking a Fix: Charting a course,” *RUSI Journal* (December 2009), 44-47.

indeed the former NATO Secretary General has called for a review of the alliance's formal and informal partnerships, which have hugely increased since the end of the Cold war.³² The continuing problem, however, is that the whole concept of 'global engagement' does not appeal to all the countries of NATO-Europe, as some for a variety of historic, political or constitutional reasons are more focused on their locality and more inclined to think that defence should end as well as start at home. The absence of agreement on the purposes, priority, even the desirability, of global engagement has currently consigned the prospect into indecision and muddle. The result has been a permissive approach in which important countries in contact status like Japan, Australia and India may set the agenda for the type and level of the cooperation they would welcome but with little current expectation of a coherent alliance response. In this circumstance, the alliance for the time being seems unlikely to be able to do little more than encourage and facilitate the efforts of interested members to do so on a national, case by case basis.

NATO also carries a good deal of political baggage around the world. It still sees itself in comparison, say, with the EU as an essentially military alliance and is seen as such by the rest of the world too. For this reason, countries like India have traditionally been wary of associating with it, preferring instead, in its evident need to forge partnerships with other navies in its areas of interest, the maintenance and development of bilateral relationships with some of its members. To illustrate the point, of the 13 navies that India gathered together in the Milan exercise at Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar islands of early-2010, no less than 8 were members of the Commonwealth.³³

The Commonwealth, on the other hand carries no such baggage – it is global in scope, not merely regional. It is not military in orientation and so is better placed to cope with the all-round demands of the 'twisted rope,' comprehensive, approach to the prevention of conflict. The organisation itself steadfastly abjures becoming involved in matters of security, but at the same time its informal, organic nature implicitly allows for it. For the same reason, it is politically much less controversial, indeed as we have seen even popular, amongst many more countries around the world. Either in combination with other countries (most obviously the United States which has some image problems of its own³⁴), other organisations or in its own right, it would seem that the Commonwealth does indeed have something worthwhile to offer in the broad defence of the trading system on which the world's peace and prosperity depends.

Perhaps we should take it more seriously than we do.

³² Stephan Fruhling and Benjamin Schreer, "Creating the Next Generation of NATO Partnerships," *RUSI Journal* (February-March 2010).

³³ Ashok Sawtrey, "Indian naval effectiveness for national growth," RSIS Working Paper.

³⁴ For some interesting ideas on this, see Norman Friedman, "The Sea Based Commonwealth," in *Naval Review* (November 2007).