

FDI Feature Interview

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'The Indian Ocean is fundamental to UK interests' - Admiral Sir Trevor Soar

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Key Points

- 50 per cent of deployed Royal Navy manpower and assets are situated in the Indian Ocean Region.
- 25 per cent of the total British force deployed in Afghanistan comes from the Royal Navy.
- Due to budget constraints, the Royal Navy is increasingly seeking to work with alliances and partner nations.

Summary

Under pressure from unprecedented defence budget cutbacks and perennial operational deployments, the Royal Navy today is confronted by escalating demands on its limited resources. In this context, **Admiral Sir Trevor Soar**, the Royal Navy's Commander-in-Chief Fleet, spoke with **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe**, and addressed matters such as the changes in the Royal Navy over the last decade, its contribution to the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, the importance of the Indian Ocean as a theatre of operations, the implications of defence budget reductions and the growing importance of coalition interoperability.

Analysis

Future Directions International

Q: Tell us about the main changes that have taken place in the Royal Navy over the last ten years?

Admiral Sir Trevor Soar: A decade ago I was the director of the Naval Staff with responsibilities for the Royal Navy's strategic plan, the 'Future Navy Vision'. This concept effectively set the tone for the future shape of the Navy. Similarly, we had a concept called 'Swing', which emphasised the need for the Navy to be adaptable, flexible and to cover a whole range of tasks. It was not just the high-end war fighting, but the Navy's contribution to every task that defence may need, including disaster relief. Over the last ten years we have had to respond to increased terrorism, conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, natural disasters such as the Indian Ocean tsunami, crises in Lebanon and Libya and, of course, piracy off the Horn of Africa. Our original view of how the Navy should adapt has fitted in well with the changing operational context.

Future Directions International

Q: How significant has the Navy's contribution been to the twin theatres of Iraq and Afghanistan?

Admiral Sir Trevor Soar: In Iraq the Royal Navy were the first people in and the last out. The Iraq training mission was run by the Royal Navy and was completed in May 2011. In Afghanistan, often people do not realise that the Royal Navy make a significant contribution. At one stage of the campaign up to 40 per cent of the UK military in Afghanistan were from the Navy.

Presently, there are over 2,000 Navy personnel deployed, which is the equivalent to about 13 warship crews, which is about 25 per cent of the total British force deployed in Afghanistan. The Royal Navy is running the joint-force support headquarters and the joint-force medical headquarters. The Navy's presence there is also significant in more routine matters with the provision of helicopter squadrons, truck drivers and general support.

Similarly, the contribution of the Royal Marines in Afghanistan has been fundamental. For example, when I was in Afghanistan over a year ago, it was hard fighting at the time and the focus was on providing security. A few weeks ago, I returned to Afghanistan to see the difference being made by our Royal Marines, for the first time I was being briefed by the Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police. We are now moving forward to enable them to provide the governance and security to their own country. There is a significant improvement.

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Q: Tell us about the Royal Navy's intervention in Libya's Civil War?

Admiral Sir Trevor Soar: There were a series of lessons from Libya. The concept of a Response Force Task Group provided us with choice. In fast changing and dynamic scenarios it also showed the value of interoperability. Libya showed the importance of working not just with NATO alliance nations, but with other partner nations as well.

For Libya, the Royal Navy mustered a Response Force Task Group, which in simple terms was an outcome of the Strategic Defence and Security Review, namely a high readiness group capable of operating either as a task group or a single unit to carry out a variety of tasks. This group, which this year was called 'Cougar' was made up of an assortment of warships, submarines and amphibious ships and aircraft. Prior to Libya, Cougar was set up to operate in the Mediterranean Sea and then to proceed into the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf to work with various partner-nations and deliver a contingency for defence.

When the situation in Libya arose, we adapted the Cougar group and prepared it whilst it was in the Mediterranean for contingency operations off Libya. We split the group into two; one half continued into the Middle East to conduct assurance and training; and the other half was available off Libya. Their activities ranged from seaborne maritime strike using attack helicopters, naval gunfire support from HM Ships Liverpool, Iron Duke and Sutherland, submarine launch cruise missiles from HMS Triumph, maritime embargo operations, evacuation operations from Benghazi and mine clearance operations. It was really a testament to the quality of the concept, which through the task group was able to prove its operational capability in real-world scenarios.

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Q: Why does the Indian Ocean remain so important to the Royal Navy?

Admiral Sir Trevor Soar: The Indian Ocean is fundamental to UK interests. For instance, Britain purchases 60 per cent of its liquid natural gas from Qatar. Furthermore, the choke points in that region such as the Straits of Hormuz and Suez Canal are all vital to Britain's energy supplies. In addition, there are over 200,000 British citizens throughout the Indian Ocean Region.

British interests in the Indian Ocean are significant, that is why the Royal Navy has operated in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean for well over 30 years. We work with partner nations in the region and provide a level of assurance and security. We operate our headquarters from either Northwood in England or Bahrain and where we run counter-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa through NATO, the EU and coalition maritime forces.

It should not come as any surprise that at any one time, out of the 25 per cent of the Royal Navy that is deployed, probably over 50 per cent of the Navy's manpower and assets are located in the Indian Ocean. In the Persian Gulf we maintain four mine hunters, an LSDA, a

tanker and at least two warships continuously, as well as an SSN. That is quite a high percentage of units that are deployed in that region permanently.

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Q: What are the implications of the Royal Navy's budget reductions?

Admiral Sir Trevor Soar: Despite the sort of immediate and headlined reductions, there is a future for the Navy capable of meeting the Future Navy Vision. In the short term we have had a reduction in the size of the Royal Navy. In the long term, however, we have still assured what the Navy is actually going to be in 2020. The Navy has to play its part in the fiscal reductions that the government has chosen to make. It has been challenging, but it has made us work smarter. In the distant future, I can look forward to a capital investment program of new ships, submarines, aircraft carriers, and a successor to Trident.

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Q: Given the major reductions in defence budgets throughout the Western world will interoperability become increasingly important for the Royal Navy?

Admiral Sir Trevor Soar: Interoperability is increasingly very important as every Western nation has undergone some level of fiscal reduction. An important part of the Royal Navy is its ability to work with alliances and partner nations. The only way we can do that is to exercise with them, to have presence in those regions and to give confidence that we are there to work with them. It is about having that ability to work with alliances and partner nations. The more that we can work together, the better we can deliver co-operation, alliances and partnerships as we move in to the future. What we are talking about now is really the ability to work together to deliver a maritime or defence effect in whatever region of the world.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

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