

First Sea Lord Speech at RUSI

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Transforming the Royal Navy by embracing the rapid technological advances of our age.

Good morning, all. And thank you Sid for that introduction.

I am almost a year into my tenure as First Sea Lord, a role which comes with many responsibilities, but also some privileges.

And today, being invited to deliver the inaugural Lord Fisher lecture, certainly falls into the latter category.

This morning, I want to speak to you about how we are transforming the Royal Navy by embracing the rapid technological advances of our age.

And I consider it fitting to be doing so with reference to Lord Fisher, one of our greatest pioneers and innovators, a leader who truly harnessed Britain's military-industrial might to maintain naval supremacy over our adversaries.

His foresight, his belief that peace can only be achieved through strength, was fundamental to helping this country secure victory in World War One.

He was a difficult character - but he believed with unflinching conviction in the power of industrial change at a time of unprecedented maritime warfare transformation.

Now synonymous with the Dreadnought programme, Fisher was also one of the key drivers behind submarine warfare and the early aircraft carriers.

It was this drive that helped ensure that the Second Reich had, by the time of the Great War, accepted it could not win the arms race at sea.

He was the Navy's disruptor in chief, guided throughout his career by the unshakeable belief that Britain's Navy was the principal instrument for maintaining peace around the globe.

In the century since Fisher, the UK's place in the world has undeniably evolved - even if, remarkably, maritime certain fundamentals of warfare have barely changed at all.

We still operate a largely steel fleet - with carriers, escorts and submarines...

...'heavy metal' platforms in a mould not dissimilar to that of Fisher's day - though their technology and capability has, of course, developed.

However, I believe his mindset, the need for us to provide real meaningful deterrence, remains essential.

Today, the challenges that he wrestled with are also ones we must confront.

Just maintaining the "capable status quo" is simply not good enough.

This need has come into focus as threats have developed and evolved over the last decade - but it became irrefutable in 2022 with Russia's full-blown invasion of Ukraine.

That rallying call has only grown louder with the geo-political developments of the last four years, including in the Middle East.

That most recent conflict, in particular the shutting of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran, has also confirmed something else: Sea power is vital if we are to maintain the free flow of trade, uphold freedom of navigation, deter our adversaries and safeguard Britain's economy against the kind of global shocks we have been experiencing.

Perhaps as importantly, it has demonstrated the vulnerability of traditional platforms.

This was obvious to me long before the first Iranian missiles were launched. That is why, in my first 100 days, I announced the Royal Navy's warfighting readiness plan.

It is a plan focussed on the future, while also ensuring we can fight immediately with the tools already at our disposal. It is not just about ensuring we can survive a sustained conflict with a peer adversary - it is a blueprint for ensuring we can win that war, too.

Lead, Fight, Win is not just another slogan. It is our fundamental mission - and is why we are overhauling of the Royal Navy through this plan.

The changes we are making will outlast my time as First Sea Lord, because they must. And these changes are about building the foundations so that our Royal Navy and Royal Marines continuously evolve. Because we must.

It is about investing in the way we train - combining the real-world, simulated, and computer-generated - so that our people can hone their warfighting skills in complex, multi-domain battlespaces, much of which can only be practised through world-leading simulation.

It is about empowering leaders at every rank, because modern warfare does not account for the chain of command. And it is about shifting mindsets, so that my people know what warfighting demands of them - and fully embrace that objective, too.

At the same time, I know that recent developments in the Gulf have put the Royal Navy in the spotlight. Were we prepared enough? Can we fight today, and if so, with what? I am not here to dodge these questions. I am here to show you that we have a plan - and that the Royal Navy is rising to the challenge before us.

Our warfighting preparations are built around five key areas, but today I am going to focus on the visible, beating heart of the plan: the Hybrid Navy.

As the name suggests, it is a vision for a fleet transformed: a mix of crewed, uncrewed and autonomous platforms. It encompasses our traditional air, surface and subsurface platforms fighting with and alongside drones and other cutting-edge weapon systems, providing the additional capabilities, mass, and scalability we need to fulfil our objectives in 2029.

I need to be clear here: this paradigm shift is not about replacing existing capabilities. It is about increasing the mass, survivability and lethality of our force. It is only through blending the conventional and the new that we will achieve this. At the same time, I am determined that we reduce the cost per unit to achieve the scale we need - because the reality is that there is no scenario in which we will have unlimited resources.

We must end the mentality that what we need is ever more expensive and larger platforms. This is a lesson Fisher was to learn himself in the run up to World War One.

I understand there will be some people who struggle to visualise the potential of these systems.

But their use is no longer hypothetical – we have already seen hard evidence of how they are turning the tide of battle. Take the Black Sea as an example.

In just a short period, Ukraine, a nation with no warships, has managed to destroy or disable a third of Putin's Black Sea fleet, primarily through maritime drones, uncrewed vessels and long-range strikes.

We also see this shift in the war on land too. Having barely featured at the outset of Russia's illegal invasion, drones are now responsible for inflicting 90 per cent of the casualties. In the Gulf, the impact of uncrewed systems and drones has also been plain for all to see.

To be credible, our warships must be able to fight and survive. As warfare continues down this path, they will not be able to do either without uncrewed support.

What this all demonstrates is that warfare is evolving – rapidly. What it also highlights is that we must fundamentally change how we procure and develop these technologies, because they are now advancing at a speed that would have seemed inconceivable only a few years ago.

Take Ukraine again as an example: right now, the Ukrainians are having to upgrade drones every day just to keep pace with the speed with which the Russians are working out how to jam and disable them.

To put that into historical perspective, when Nelson won the most decisive naval battle in history at Trafalgar in 1805, he did so with a flagship, HMS Victory, which was already 40 years old and yet still considered a first-rate ship of the line.

Today, we measure technological advancement in weeks and months, not years. And the scary bit, as I have previously spoken about, is that things will only accelerate from here. The pace of technological change will never be as slow again as it is now. In the 21st century, agility, adaptability and innovation have become the decisive factors in conflict.

That is why we must not only invest in the technologies of the future – we must change our entire mindset if we are to stay ahead of our enemies. That requires us to take more risk, to ruthlessly remove unnecessary regulations and other barriers holding us back, so that we can cut the time it takes between trialling new systems and putting them to sea. It requires courage, and getting used to failing occasionally, in order that we succeed more often.

That might be easy to say, but it is not an easy thing to do. It is why the military historian, B. H. Liddell Hart, once wrote that “the only thing harder than getting a new idea into the military mind is to get an old idea out.”

But we will do it – because we must.

Our Warfighting Ready Plan is already changing the way we select our leaders, the way we train our people, how we exercise and how we organise for speed and decision-making.

And the new procurement model outlined in the Strategic Defence Review will see those decisions-to-delivery cut to as little as three months for certain systems.

Our Hybrid Navy will be geared towards the North Atlantic and High North, reflecting the priorities of the SDR but also, more fundamentally, our geography.

This is where our long-term focus must remain, where Russian surface and sub-surface activity continues to pose a persistent challenge, both for the protection of our critical national infrastructure and the continuous at sea deterrent.

You will all doubtless have watched the Defence Secretary's announcement earlier this month, about how the Royal Navy exposed and disrupted Russian submarine activity in our own backyard while the world's gaze was fixed on the Middle East.

This type of activity is something I have been warning about for some time - and it is why the Secretary of State and Chief of Defence Staff made clear that Russia remains the gravest threat to our security.

To put that incident in its broader context, we have seen Russian incursions into our waters jump by almost a third in the last two years. In 2025 alone, the Royal Navy was required to respond dozens of times in support of homeland defence against Russian Navy surface vessels.

However, it is Russia's reinvestment in its submarine programmes that poses the most acute threat. Like our surface fleet, our submarines spent a substantial amount of time responding to Russian subsurface activity last year - and all the signs suggest this pattern of behaviour by Moscow will only worsen further in future.

That is why we need a Hybrid Navy - this is why we need the Royal Navy - because it is only through the enhancement of new autonomous and uncrewed vessels that we will be able to keep pace with this growing threat. Standing still is not an option.

As for what Hybrid looks like, by now many of you will be familiar with our central programmes - our Atlantic Fleet Series.

Without going over too much old ground, the first is Atlantic Bastion, our programme for defending the UK's continuous at sea deterrent and the critical national infrastructure that our nation, our economy, and our NATO allies are completely dependent on. When operational, Bastion will provide a defensive net, a layered sensor network across the North Atlantic to safeguard against hostile subsurface activity.

When threats are detected, data will be seamlessly fed back to us, with existing and new offensive capabilities then deployed to neutralise them.

Atlantic Shield, our second programme, is our contribution to Integrated Air and Missile Defence to protect the homeland, our CNI, the fleet and our European allies against the increasingly sophisticated drones, hypersonic and ballistic threats we face. The situation in the Gulf has demonstrated just how important this will be in future.

And our third, Atlantic Strike, is about enhancing our conventional deterrence, our reach, and ensuring that if an adversary attacks us, we have the capabilities to hit back decisively. That means hybrid carrier strike groups, it means enhancing our precision long-range strikes, and it means teaming our Commando Forces with uncrewed surface, land and air systems to bolster their amphibious, arctic and xxx capabilities.

Real progress is being made. The first of our uncrewed gliders, which will patrol the North Atlantic to detect and monitor our hostile activity, will be in the water for Bastion this year.

My aim is to have the first of our uncrewed escort ships sailing alongside our Royal Navy warships within the next two years... And to launch the first jet-powered drone from a carrier next year.

All of these programmes require the Royal Navy to ensure our current platforms and personnel are utilised to the full, while at the same time bringing online new capabilities that give us a much greater edge over our adversaries.

A genuinely world-leading force. And, by the way, a blend with billions of pounds in UK exports potential if we get this right.

If we zone-in on Bastion for a minute, I want you to picture a scenario in the near future in which a Russian uncrewed underwater vessel is detected lurking close to sensitive seabed cables.

A British Type 26, the world's most advanced ASW frigate, goes into the North Atlantic - not alone, but sailing in company with two uncrewed escorts, both using AI to work with the warship. They will protect the parent ship, adding sensors, weapons and decoy capabilities.

Meanwhile, sub-surface, a new advanced submarine drone, will also help seek out the enemy. Crewed and uncrewed platforms working together. This is what hybrid looks like.

Of course, I understand that some people may still not be convinced by me standing here and talking about what the future might hold.

Thankfully, the time for talking is over; we're about to show you what our Hybrid Navy might be capable of.

Firstly, I can confirm that we held our first Navy-wide wargame to test the potential of the Hybrid Navy at the end of last month.

Held at Southwick Park, the wargame provided clear evidence that our Hybrid approach will deliver a significant increase in warfighting capability, with the chances of mission success rising notably.

Our Hybrid Navy generated a substantial increase in combat mass, as measured by weapons and sensors, while also providing added flexibility and tactical choice for commanders.

Our missile capacity increased three-fold - at the level necessary to win a contest in the North Atlantic.

Across all our key missions, be it CASD, carrier strike groups, amphibious trike groups or integrated air and missile defence, we saw our readiness to respond improve markedly.

Secondly, I can announce that we have received our first fleet of uncrewed vessels as part of Project Beehive - marking a significant milestone in the creation of the Hybrid Navy.

Through our partnership with UK company Kraken, we now have at our disposal 20 boats that will be used by 47 Commando Royal Marines, our experts in amphibious warfare, for training and operations.

These boats have been delivered in a matter of months - testament to the agile procurement system we have established and the strong partnerships we have forged with British industry.

However, while this is all very exciting, I am fully aware that the real test is still ahead of us. And that test is putting our new Hybrid assets to sea. As has already been reported, in response to events in the Middle East we have spent several weeks turning RFA Lyme Bay, an auxiliary dock landing ship, into a mothership for autonomous and uncrewed mine hunting capabilities.

This is just the start of a multi-phase process, one which gives us rapidly deployable and easily scalable solutions to the current situation in the Middle East – all while minimising cost to the taxpayer compared to traditional ships, reducing the risk to our sailors and marines in the process, and improving our effectiveness.

It means capabilities that can protect Britain's interests and our Allies at a fraction of the cost of a multi-million-pound missile. Put more simply, a sledgehammer is no longer needed to crack the nut. As the current situation stabilises, I am confident that we can demonstrate to the world what our Hybrid Navy can deliver, with these proven capabilities forming the foundations for Atlantic Bastion and Shield.

However, this is not the end to our ambition. We must bring allies with us on this journey. We see our Hybrid Navy as part of something far greater: a new partnership of Northern Navies, a multinational maritime force to defend Northwest Europe and the High North, with the UK at the helm.

The proposal is relatively simple: since 2014, the UK, through the Joint Expeditionary Force has led a group of 10 like-minded European nations.

Collectively we work together to ensure we can rapidly respond to emerging threats in the High North, North Atlantic and the Baltic regions. JEF is there to complement NATO, rather than drawing resources away from it.

It has worked well – but the reality is we must now deepen and evolve this partnership if we are to generate the collective combat power necessary to provide conventional deterrence along our open sea border with Russia. Like the current JEF model, it should not be seen as separate to NATO, but rather complementary to it. It would be a means for NATO to respond rapidly and seize the initiative in this strategically vital region.

I aim to create a maritime force that trains, exercises and prepares together. A force designed to fight immediately if required, with real capabilities, real war plans, and real integration.

A force in which interchangeability – the ability to substitute, swap, or mix equipment, parts, ammunition, or personnel – is made possible because member nations would be operating common systems and platforms, shared digital networks, logistics and stockpiles.

A force that generates the maritime, air and amphibious strike capabilities we need.

This would be a visible and persistent conventional deterrent. A force that is stronger, collectively, than the sum of its parts.

The Royal Navy is uniquely placed to drive this forward. We have already shown glimpses of what is possible through our Lunna House Agreement with Norway, through which our two navies are set to combine to counter Russian activity in the North Atlantic.

We are also exporting our most advanced warships – the Type 26 – to Norway and Canada and I hope similar deals will soon be struck with other Northern allies. And I know from conversations with my counterparts that our allies are taking a keen interest in our Hybrid Naval plans.

What this means is that we are now looking at the creation of a family of allied fleets – something that has not happened in decades. Ultimately, we intend for them to be trained through our Fleet Operational Standards and Training (FOST), supported through UK doctrine and integration standards, and commanded from Northwood in our Maritime Operations Centre.

Last week I hosted naval chiefs from across Northern Europe to discuss how we can make this plan a reality.

And I am delighted to confirm to you today that during that meeting, we signed a statement of intent committing each of our nations to working up detailed proposals for our Northern Navies initiative.

We know we have no time to lose, which is why by the end of this year, I want us all to have signed a formal declaration, laying the foundations for what will be a vital and enduring partnership for many years to come.

Later this summer, I will be setting out more details on how I intend to deliver this.

Action for Hybrid. Action for the High North and North Atlantic. Action for the situation in the Middle East. These are the prerequisites for warfighting success.

By the time I depart in 2029, I am determined that the Royal Navy will be much stronger than the one I inherited.

A fleet fit for 21st century warfighting. Our personnel fully equipped, committed, and confident in their objectives. Our leaders empowered and ready for what lies ahead of them. A Navy better integrated with our closest allies - leaner, more agile, more innovative. A Navy embracing the changes it has to make.

It will be, quite simply, a very different Navy to the one I inherited.

Some may feel uncomfortable about the pace of this transformation - but our Island's history shows us why it must be done.

If we are to apply any lesson from Lord Fisher's career to the present day, let it be this: "Sea fighting is pure common sense. The first of all its necessities is speed."

Thank you.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/first-sea-lord-speech-at-rusi>