5 Alternative Routes and Command of the Sea

(a) Introduction: The fleet-in-being strategy

The pursuit of victory in a decisive battle, or series of battles, is evidently the means of gaining command of the sea most advocated by orthodox maritime strategists, although, as we have seen, they do so in varying degree. It is a common assumption of their arguments that the fleet taking this obvious and straightforward route to naval success needs to be stronger, or at least as strong, as the opposition — whether that strength is measured primarily in terms of number and quality of ships, operational skills or fighting spirit.

What of the fleet that knows it is inferior and cannot realistically hope to gain command of the sea by the normal method? In other words, what is one to do with a self-evidently second best navy? A succession of countries in conflict with the great maritime powers have faced the problem, but, as Castex remarked, it is by no means restricted to them. The strongest navy, as well, may be forced into a limited defensive in certain circumstances. The vulnerabilities created by the sheer size and spread of her maritime interests has even obliged England, he wrote, to adopt this policy on frequent occasions, perhaps while pursuing a vigorous offensive elsewhere. At some stage or other, in short, all navies have had to deal with the problem of making the best use of limited assets.

The situation has usually been to adopt one of a number of related naval options loosely bundled together under the title of the ‘fleet-in-being strategy’. They all proceed from the assumption that command of the sea is a relative and not absolute thing. Some of them actually aim to achieve a useful degree of command of the sea, but by a roundabout route avoiding a decision by battle. Many more represent the attempt by an inferior power to derive positive strategic benefit from its naval forces by doing something useful at sea, such as attacking the enemy’s trade or his coasts, without aspiring to the eventual defeat of the other side’s main forces. Others have the essentially negative aim of denying, perhaps by continuous harassment and evasion, a stronger enemy the capacity to enjoy fully the fruits of his superiority. Finally, there are
campaigns which aim merely to ensure the continued survival of the weaker fleet.

These variants of the fleet-in-being strategy are different in degree, but not in kind. They range from the moderated offensive at one edge of the spectrum to passive defence at the other. They have been attempted on the high seas and in coastal waters, for long periods of time and for short. So varied are they, in fact, that it is not always evident that they can be contained within a single category in any very meaningful way. The main merit of so doing, however, is that it helps distinguish these strategies from the other, more orthodox, notions, which aim to 'obtain a decision' by central battle.

(b) The fleet-in-being and the defence of territory

One of the liveliest controversies in the evolution of maritime strategy has been about the value of an inferior fleet-in-being in the defence of territory against the hostile attentions of a stronger force. An early exponent of the idea was Hermocrates whose propositions were detailed in Thucydides' account of the Expedition to Syracuse. Hermocrates noted that the Athenian invasion fleet would have to sail to Sicily from Corcya on the island of Corfu: he argued that it would be very vulnerable to a flanking attack as it passed by the southern shores of Italy and so urged his compatriots to gather their ships at Tarentum and Cape Iapygia. When the Athenians found out about this move, Hermocrates argued, they would be in a cruel dilemma. If they left their stores and transports behind and came over to deal with the Syracusan fleet in battle, the Syracusans could refuse battle and then the Athenians would be in great trouble. 'Having come over with slender supplies and prepared for a naval engagement, they will not know what to do on these desolate coasts.' If, on the other hand, they came over regardless, with their invasion fleet, they would put themselves at a severe tactical disadvantage, compared to the Syracusans, who would be fresh, in good order and not encumbered with store ships, troops and transports. 'In my opinion,' concluded Hermocrates, 'the anticipation of these difficulties will hamper them to such a degree that they will never leave Corcyra.' In fact, though, Hermocrates' pleas fell on deaf ears and his ingenious scheme was not put into effect.

Nor was the similar proposal of Admiral Lord Torrington, two thousand years later. The Torrington affair is of particular interest because in it was coined for the first time the phrase 'the fleet-in-being'; Philip Colomb's attempt to rehabilitate the reputation of Admiral Torrington also produced the first substantial exploration of the theory behind the concept. Briefly, the situation was that in the summer of 1690 the Royal Navy had been dispersed in several detachments, each of