9 Who Needs Ocean-going Navies?

Our country has built a modern fleet and has sent it out into the ocean to ensure its state interests, in order to defend itself reliably from attack from extensive oceanic directions. – GORSHKOVi

The United States is inevitably a maritime nation, and the United States and its Navy have inescapable global responsibilities. – WATKINS2

Our long-term aim would be to confine the use of our armed forces outside the NATO area to disaster relief, participation in UN peacekeeping forces and similar roles . . . the practice of deploying naval task forces to ‘show the flag’ in the Pacific and Indian Oceans will cease. – BRITISH LABOUR PARTY3

One could comfortably fill a chapter with the contradictory pronouncements of the maritime nations concerning the role of their navies. Any appeal to manifest destiny is naturally nonsense. The Koreans displayed naval prowess – as they still do – centuries before either Americans or Russians had been heard of. Almost as long elapsed before any other Europeans emulated the global reach of the Vikings, still perhaps the most cost-effective sea predators human history knows. Naval ambitions and naval resources rise and fall not only with the balance of power in the world, but also with the variable chemistry of national politics.

There are two ways of trying to define an ocean-going navy: in terms of technical characteristics or of political and strategic functions. Most of the world’s navies naturally fail both tests. All they can do and all they are meant to do is to provide a degree of coastal defence and to keep foreign fishing craft and other trespassers out of the exclusive economic zone. Only those nations with ambitions more extensive than mere estate management even consider the idea of an ocean-going navy and few of them have much chance of putting their idea into practice.

Technically one should not be too exacting. If a true ocean-going navy had to have integral air superiority, amphibious capability and full logistic support afloat, then only the United States Navy would
qualify. And even they were revealed, in the summer of 1987, as lacking adequate minesweeping resources in the most active theatre of operations: the Persian Gulf. The true test of an ocean-going navy is its ability to sustain distant combat with a likely enemy. Readiness to fight anyone anywhere can be demanded only of a Super Power. Measuring the ocean-going effectiveness of lesser navies depends on an equation with many variables: distance, duration, the strength of the opponent, the type of operation needed, the political climate at home and abroad. No navy commands any absolute amount of power. What it can do varies from one conflict to another.

The Falklands War, for instance, tested the British navy to its ocean-going limit, not just in terms of distance, but in the combination of distance with other factors: the time to be spent at sea; the need for replenishment at sea; the ability to transport, land and provide air cover for troops as well as air defence for the fleet. Naturally risk is inseparable from such undertakings – ‘tis not in mortals to command success’ – but no great change in strategic parameters was needed to make this operation too hazardous to attempt: if the Royal Navy had been able to deploy only one aircraft carrier or if the operational radius of Argentine aircraft had been significantly greater.

If Operation Corporate represented about the most the Royal Navy, perhaps any navy other than those of the Super Powers, could be expected to achieve unaided, can one envisage a minimum qualification for ocean-going navies? Distance is perhaps the easiest test to set. An ocean-going navy must be capable of some kind of fighting, not merely beyond its 200-mile zone, but out of its own sea. There are navies, for instance in the Baltic and the Mediterranean, with no apparent plans or plausible capacities for remoter combat. The occasional cruise or visit, perhaps by a training ship, to some distant sea or port beyond the Straits or the Kattegat does not count. The number and type of ships needed for a distant deployment will naturally vary. Different missions have very different requirements, but distance alone is likely also to demand endurance – therefore reliefs, sea-going logistic support and a total strength in excess of the minimum needs of coastal defence. Six British warships, as well as auxiliaries, had to be committed in order to keep two in the Gulf. Britain and France, as well as the Super Powers, have shown they can manage as much.

If West Germany or Italy wanted to deploy a larger force at such a distance, they might have to requisition extra logistic support – as even Britain did in 1982 – but both have some potential. In 1987