INTRODUCTION

As it enters the new millennium, the size, composition and outlook of the Royal Navy promises to be considerably different from the one which existed a mere decade ago. If the Navy is successful in getting its case accepted within the Ministry of Defence (MoD), we could, once again, see a Royal Navy containing relatively large aircraft carriers earmarked for the projection of British military power overseas, supported by a brigade level amphibious assault capability and nuclear-powered attack submarines equipped with conventionally armed land-attack cruise missiles (TLAM). What this would amount to is a return to a far more traditional defence policy than we have seen over the last fifty years with a maritime rather than continental emphasis. Incorporated within this would be a defence policy that utilizes available technology to project power from the sea to a far greater distance and far more accurately than has previously been possible.

Such a scenario would have been hard to imagine a decade ago, let alone 17 years after the infamous Nott review of 1981 which seemed to sound the death knell of a balanced fleet. The reasons for change are varied, but the most significant of them has been the willingness of successive post-Cold War British governments to re-examine the role of military power within the changed strategic environment. This has not, unsurprisingly, been without significant internal division, particularly from those who wish to maintain the land–air emphasis of the 1980s. But, what is already clear is that a new priority has been given by successive governments to the relative importance and ability to ‘punch above our weight’ and a renewed discussion about the concept of expeditionary warfare. Within this thinking the latest strand to emerge has been the new Labour government’s reference to ‘defence diplomacy’. Although this concept has not been fully worked out yet the implications of this are, according to Christopher Bellamy, already clear:
The foreign policy objectives emerging from the Government’s review, stressing the need to ensure security through diplomatic means, and to protect British and European interests world-wide, begin to suggest a maritime strategy. Maybe, for Britain and the US, a new maritime era is dawning…

Given our objectives and much of our history, it makes sense. If we want to make a real contribution to international security in the new world order, a maritime contribution would be most welcome.7

This chapter therefore sets out to consider the Royal Navy’s role within the changing domestic and international environment brought about by the end of the Cold War. The chapter is subdivided into three parts. First, it will examine how government policy towards the use of military power has evolved since the end of the Cold War and consider how it is likely to develop into the twenty-first century. Second, it will look at the extent to which the Royal Navy has adapted to the changing strategic environment to date and then review how it plans to evolve in the early part of the twenty-first century. Third, the analysis concludes by examining the compatibility of the Royal Navy’s response to government policy towards the use of the military, considers the likelihood of the Royal Navy's plans being implemented, and then explores the implications for the Royal Navy in the next millennium.

‘PUNCHING ABOVE ITS WEIGHT:’8 THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT AND THE ROLE OF MILITARY POWER

Defence writers frequently quote statistics to highlight the increasing tempo of military operations and other ‘peacetime commitments’ currently confronting the armed forces of the West. Britain is no exception to this role,9 with the issue of the rotation of army units and the regular breaching of the ‘harmony rules’10 by the Royal Navy being a source of continuing concern to successive Service Chiefs.11 What these statistics also reveal is an increasing willingness of successive British governments to use military power in the pursuit of Britain's interests.

For all the major Cold War belligerents the bipolar system imposed considerable restraints upon their use of force. Fear of crises escalating into a Third World War resplendent with nuclear weapons placed considerable restrictions upon the use of force by participating states. For Britain the principal objective of its defence policy throughout this period remained constant, to deter the Soviet Union and its allies from