‘Power projection’ is back in fashion as the stability of the international order is threatened now more by the weakness of states than by their strength. The desire and ability to project power for policing, crisis management, conflict prevention and to obtain influence in the world order reflects a world freed from the imperatives of the Cold War and the ideological competition that it entailed. But the freedom of individual states to project power is now paradoxically constrained by the structure of international interdependence that finally finished off the Cold War and which has replaced it as the dominant trend in world politics. It is not fear of our adversaries or respect for the rules of a dangerous bipolar game that now constrains the major states from projecting their power so much as an awareness of how difficult it is, these days, to make such projected power effective in achieving our aims. This is particularly so for the United Kingdom, a state that has aspirations to a world role, a maritime and expeditionary tradition and the luxury now of a relatively stable international environment in which to operate.

The victory of liberal democracy over the forces of Soviet communism has allowed an unprecedented degree of discretion over how the UK should exercise its external policy. This has important implications for maritime policy. The UK is no longer driven by the imperatives of defending Western Europe against an overwhelming attack and thereby responsible for keeping Atlantic reinforcement routes open. Nor is it heavily burdened by the overseas responsibilities of Empire, or the immediate post-imperial role. Its responsibilities within the remaining Overseas Territories apply to less than 150,000 people. The 1995 Statement on the Defence Estimates made the point that 92 per cent of the UK’s trade (by volume) is transported by sea;
but given that a significant proportion of UK trade is with European countries, the sea ways that really matter in this equation are the North Sea, English Channel and the Mediterranean. All these routes are relatively secure, are the mutual concern of many different states and (in the case of the UK) can all be circumvented by road and rail with the advent of the Channel Tunnel. The UK, in other words, is less constrained by its economic geography or its island status than at any time in its history. Nor, even, is the present government constrained by a lack of domestic political support. It enjoys a landslide majority within Parliament and is not faced – as even the 1945–51 Labour government was faced – with backbench dissent over defence policy and the relationship with the United States, the onset of the Cold War and much else besides. When the government asserts, therefore, that it intends to emphasize an ‘ethical dimension’ in its external policy and to give a more central place to environmental concerns, conflict prevention initiatives and peace support operations – all of which suggest more expeditionary operations – there is reason to believe that ministers mean it.3

Genuine constraints on external policy, however, come in more structural forms than is apparent from short-term policy initiatives. The present government has no choice but to express this unprecedented level of policy discretion within a thickening web of powerful structural constraints that affect all governments, in the developed and undeveloped world – with the partial exception of the United States – which serve to limit the capacity to project power overseas. This is not, however, necessarily all bad news for the United Kingdom. In some ways, the increasingly circumscribed structures of the international environment in which external policy is played out can work to the UK’s advantage. The subtle realities of this proposition are evident in an examination of three particular dimensions of modern constraints: the international structure in which the UK exists; the resources it has to put in to external policy; and the domestic structure of policy-making in contemporary Britain. The trick for foreign and defence policy-makers – much easier said than done – is to discern the force and direction of major structural constraints and play to the strengths the UK still has within that framework. And certainly, the UK’s maritime capacities – the ships and hardware, the quality of the naval personnel in both the maritime marine and the Royal Navy, plus the legacy and traditions of the UK as a maritime power – should be recognized as one of the country’s strengths. It is a strength, however, that has to be exercised within the context of a rapidly evolving international system.