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THE FUTURE OF AMPHIBIOUS FORCES

PETER ROBERTS

In an era of international relations that is increasingly characterised by complexity and uncertainty, as well as a growing domestic reluctance to become ‘entangled’ abroad, the military options for political leaders in dealing with emerging crises appear to be dwindling. However, in this article Peter Roberts avers that there is one element of the British armed forces – its amphibious capability – that is relatively under-used as currently configured. If transformed into smaller, more frequently forward-deployed and capable units, amphibious forces could offer politicians an alternative option in crisis situations, and especially in those that emerge in the complex environment of the littoral.

Amphibious operations centre on the projection of a military force onto a (potentially) hostile shore from the sea. Such operations are complex to conduct and are regarded by many military planners as high-risk options. However, for a nation such as the UK, surrounded by water and with limited strategic air-lift capacity, there are no other viable or affordable means of achieving effective strategic and operational mobility. Today, the First Sea Lord, Admiral George Zambellas, is tasked by government to ‘Deliver the ability to land forces from the sea by helicopter and over the beach with protected vehicles and supplies from specialist ships’ in order to ‘project a Commando Group to conduct simple and complex theatre-entry amphibious and littoral operations as part of a wider joint campaign’. This aspiration falls short of the UK’s former ability to conduct forcible theatre-entry on the scale witnessed in previous campaigns in Gallipoli, Sicily, Normandy, the Falklands, Kuwait and Iraq, and there are no plans to generate more significant British amphibious force levels for the future. This more limited scale also means that the UK could not replicate recent amphibious operations undertaken by Russia (Abkhazia in Georgia, 2008), Israel (Gaza, 2014), or Sri Lanka (amphibious assaults against insurgent strongholds around the Jaffna peninsula and Mullaitivu, 1996–2009). Perhaps more importantly, it must also be questioned whether there would be the political appetite in the UK to undertake high-risk, high-cost, large-scale amphibious operations from the sea – such as those executed by the United States Marine Corps (USMC) in the Pacific during the Second World War – even if the prospects of success are good.

There are no plans to increase the UK’s amphibious capabilities

Given such arguments, the meagre size of the current UK amphibious capability, and the recent counter-insurgency operations which have tainted British campaign experience for a decade, the question remains as to why successive UK governments have continued to make significant, long-term investment in ships, weapons, logistics and infrastructure to provide an enduring British capability to undertake military operations from the sea.

To understand why amphibious capabilities remain at the heart of UK defence policy, this article will examine the historical uses of British amphibious forces and the likely future military environment using evidence generated in the UK and abroad. It will then outline the choice to be made regarding the future of amphibious forces, as determined by their utility across the conflict spectrum, as well as some potential implications for the future force structure.

The Utility of Amphibious Force

Julius Caesar’s landings in modern-day Kent in 55 BC and again in 54 BC gave the inhabitants of the British Isles their first experiences of invasion, followed, many centuries later, by Viking raiding in the ninth and tenth centuries AD. Elsewhere in the world, amphibious operations were undertaken by peoples in Asia, South America and – to a lesser extent – Africa. Whilst geographic terrain often required the use of the sea for raids and invasions, tribes and peoples also sought to use the sea as the quickest means to attack enemies and gain resources in coastal
areas, rather than risk a prolonged trek
through hostile lands. Warring factions
also used seaborne attack to develop
the element of surprise as a battle-
winning edge against larger numbers
of opponents. Efforts to counter such
attacks included the development of
sophisticated warning mechanisms that
required centralised control as well as
more formalised command networks
to organise responses ranging from
evacuation to meeting an enemy on the
beach (where experience dictated the
best chance of defeating an amphibious
force lay). Examples of amphibious raids
and assaults, as well as withdrawals, are
evident in colonial operations (such as
assaults against Louisburg and Quebec,
1745–59), during the American War
of Independence and throughout the
nineteenth century.4

However, whilst amphibious
operations have been undertaken by
nations and civilisations since the time
of the Ancient Egyptians, they did not
become a formalised area of politico-
military operations until Alfred Thayer
Mahan briefly examined them in his
seminal work, *The Influence of Sea Power
Upon History, 1660–1783*, published in
1890. Mahan’s work was notable because
of the connection he made between
naval power and national will, interest,
influence, and expression of aims and
intent; amphibious warfare was clearly
an element in these considerations,
albeit, according to Mahan, a small
one.5 His contemporary Philip Colomb,
by comparison, focused more on
expeditions launched on land from the
sea; indeed, he dedicated more than
half of his *Naval Warfare*, published in
1891, to an examination of this area.6

Whilst naval leaders adhered to Mahan’s
romanticised version of a decisive battle
at sea in pursuit of national victory, army
leaders saw in Colomb’s work the real
potential of landward operations from a
secure and sovereign base afloat. In 1897,
Garnet Wolseley, commander-in-chief of
the British Army, wrote: ‘We still have to
convince the Navy that they cannot win
a war by themselves and that we are not
trying to nab the money they ought to
have but want to make our power what
it must be to be effective – amphibious.’7

It was comments such as these
that allowed a British school of
naval strategists to fully incorporate
amphibious operations within wider
considerations of sea power and national
interests. Both Julian S Corbett and
Charles E Callwell returned to the subject
time and again, offering perspectives on
the military efficacy of the amphibious
domain rather than, in a Mahanian
fashion, noting the highly political and
strategic role of amphibious forces. The
nature of the debate, pitting proponents
of purist sea power against militarist
theorists, stifled the development of
formalised doctrine in this area and whilst
both the Boer War and twentieth-century
colonial operations by European nations
prior to the First World War contained
many examples of landward operations launched from the sea, studies at staff colleges were primarily focused on the issues of landing large bodies of armed men and logistics on ‘safe’ beaches rather than exploiting the ability of seaborne forces to surprise the enemy by landing, for example, in his rear areas. In essence, amphibious operations were seen as a way of landing an army rather than delivering a military effect by themselves.

The US suffered from similar issues in terms of finding a natural home for the capability. The USMC was founded in 1775, the same year as the Royal Marines (although the latter can trace its origins as a seaborne fighting force to operations against the Dutch in 1664). However, having decided to create a fourth armed service dedicated to amphibious operations, successive administrations – most notably under Presidents Franklin D Roosevelt and Harry S Truman – sought to disband that service and amalgamate the force under either army or naval control: the cost of the capability and requirements for additional layers of command and administration were not seen as efficient.

With the UK, the US and other nations continuing to struggle in this regard, it is perhaps timely to restate the modern-day reality and utility of amphibious forces – and to do so regularly and precisely. When weighing the utility of an asset that is not in immediate or constant use, it is advantageous not only to analyse the historical record of its employment, but also to anticipate the expected or likely benefits of its future use. However, it should be remembered that although the nature of warfare may be constant, the character of war differs markedly from age to age. Form and tactics must constantly be adapted to changing circumstances, requirements and technology in order to fulfil their purpose. The scale, composition and operation of amphibious forces should likewise be sufficiently flexible to encompass this element of necessary evolution.

Historical Utility

The last renaissance of British amphibious forces occurred between 1956 and 1966 and was notable for the role played by the commando carriers. The deliberate investment in the ability to field a ‘self-supporting commando’, in conjunction with both fixed- and rotary-wing naval aviation, was politically motivated and instigated by Prime Minister Anthony Eden just prior to the Suez Crisis of 1956, and was encapsulated within the 1957 defence White Paper: ‘On account of its mobility, the Royal Navy together with the Royal Marines, provides another effective means of bringing power rapidly to bear in peacetime emergencies or limited hostilities’. Such statements had been shaped largely by Lord Mountbatten’s Way Ahead Committee of 1955 – a self-imposed internal naval review of capabilities and forces with the aim of delivering efficiencies and savings imposed by Duncan Sandys as secretary of state for defence. The impact on the Royal Navy was significant and saw the refitting of several Second World War-era light aircraft carriers as vessels capable of fielding a full commando, along with dedicated air support, and plans for two bespoke amphibious assault ships and six logistics landing ships.

The true utility of amphibious forces is as a political tool

Almost immediately after being commissioned, these new commando carriers saw extensive use across the spectrum of defence engagement, constabulary operations, deterrence missions, coercive activity and interventions. For nearly a decade, these vessels became the ‘go-to’ force for successive prime ministers, with the force engaged in the Gulf in 1961, Indonesia in 1962, Malaya and Indonesia in 1963 and Tanganyika in 1964. In these operations, the commando force became the connector with local forces and provided the political decision-makers in Whitehall with local intelligence, presence and forward-deployed forces to back up diplomatic discussions. Not only was the force always in demand for military operations, but it was also regularly requested by various ambassadors from Iran to Indonesia – to perform missions ranging from diplomatic protection to a show of force – as part of the Foreign Office effort to withdraw from east of Suez without loss of face.

However, the force became far less attractive as a political tool shortly thereafter. The withdrawal from east of Suez in the late 1960s saw the dedication of British amphibious forces to a military role in northern Norway, reinforcing NATO’s northern flank instead. The shift in operating concept, from an on-call force for political ends to a military unit with a specified and geographically determined role, coincided with the cancellation of the CVA-01 aircraft carrier – the first of three slated to be built – in the 1966 defence White Paper, which stated that amphibious operations would no longer be conducted without land-based air cover, which would be provided by NATO thereafter. The primacy of the Soviet threat dominated British defence thinking at this stage and whilst the Falklands campaign in 1982 overturned this assumption regarding air-power support, amphibious forces continued to drift further into discrete military utility rather than re-emerging as the forward-deployed articulation of British political and national will, which they once had been.

Many detailed historical reviews have emphasised the military role of amphibious forces, providing evidence that they offer disproportionate results for their size by exploiting surprise and shock effect. To achieve such impact, and especially when operating independently and at range, amphibious troops need to be resilient and highly trained. In conventional operations these capabilities are necessary to overcome the fragility of the transition from sea to land and to overwhelm in-place defenders and any available reinforcements.

However, although this exploration of the military elements is correct, historical analysis also clearly demonstrates that the true utility of amphibious forces has been as a political tool rather than a strictly military one. Indeed, the doctrinal emphasis since 1945 on amphibious forces seizing opposed or contested beaches is largely...
an aberration that has skewed the understanding and equipping of this capability over the last seventy years. Rather than being coastal in focus, amphibious operations have historically been used in a wider geographic area known as the littoral – a complex arena of political, economic, demographic, environmental, cultural and military interests – with their missions in such areas designed to achieve impact and influence beyond the beach. Indeed, in this way, their operations are intended to ‘get inside’ the mind of the political leaders of an enemy, rather than merely seizing its terrain. This distinction allows such operations to be constructed and designed with the sole aim of directly achieving political effect. Amphibious operations, therefore, should not be considered merely in terms of an assault on a beach – contested or otherwise – and the platforms that allow transit between the sea and the land.

**Amphibious operations must ‘get inside’ the mind of enemy leaders**

Other nations are beginning to understand this. Recent American doctrine expresses the effectiveness of amphibious forces in terms of their ability to ‘exploit the element of surprise and capitalize on enemy weakness by projecting combat power precisely at the most advantageous location and time.’ Yet even this focus on broader psychological effects is too limited. Much more pertinent is the recent Australian definition stating that amphibious forces ‘provide government with a cost-effective option for shaping and influencing the geo-political environment.’ Amphibious forces are a nation’s primary tool for engaging, politically and militarily, at will in the whole complex and contested environment of the littoral.

**The Future Engagement Space**

The uncertain, unpredictable and doubtless hazardous future for all nations has been articulated by numerous scholars. These challenges could be regarded as more complex for the UK due to its historical adoption of a grand strategy based on financial affordability rather than prudent insurance. This is made clear in Hew Strachan’s redefinition of the British ‘way of war’ based on the availability of standing forces sufficient only to implement delaying actions in the event of an existential threat until a more complete mobilisation can be achieved. However, today, UK decisions about defence and security also continue to be complicated further by historical commitments retained across the world to territories and former colonies. To these factors one must add a persistent British strategic culture of intervention (albeit one that may resonate less with the wider public today than in the past), and the aspiration to maintain a highly influential voice on the international stage, economically, diplomatically and militarily.

It appears that the limited forces available to the British military must now be able to react to pre-conflict activity (such as training foreign forces), to conflicts involving hybrid, proxy, fourth-generation and counter-insurgency activity, as well as to coercion and more conventional warfare. Added to this is the need to perform the rebranded task of defence engagement (previously known as defence diplomacy) and upstream engagement. Societal trends of human demographic and social movement also have an impact on the location of these activities. Scholars have pointed to geographic, societal and demographic trends which suggest that likely areas of future friction will be in and around coastal mega-cities and resource hubs. In military terms, this will require greater attention on those geographical areas known broadly as ‘the littoral’; it will also require a corresponding shift in the way that fighting forces achieve their aims and objectives on the modern battlefield and a move away, perhaps, from considering all conflict simply through the eyes of an infantryman.

**The Real Littoral (Freshwater) Challenge**

Within the littoral zone, amphibious forces are currently structured, equipped and trained to focus on the seizure of, or insertion over, beach areas in order to effect theatre-entry for follow-on joint forces. This focus does little justice to the wide range of terrain and missions that amphibious forces are likely to be called upon to perform in littoral areas across the globe, whether supporting embassies with additional protection in the face of local disturbances or gathering ‘ground truth’ information in an area to enable politicians to make better-informed decisions about committing forces on a larger scale. Operational experience shows that if amphibious forces seek simply to exploit arterial waterways for limited raiding action, then littoral connectors – that is, vessels, boats and helicopters – and bravery may be all that is required. However, if broader missions from the amphibious spectrum are to be achieved, then bespoke doctrine, training, equipment, operating procedures and skills are required. Readiness to project a fighting formation as part of theatre-entry operations does not necessarily impart readiness or suitability to conduct the full suite of littoral operations without substantial risk. A large formation of men, air power and vessels to assault a beach might allow for coercive pressure, but does little to support the policing of inland waterways; nor does it assist other government departments engaged in more nuanced activities in support of British industrial interests.

**Areas of future friction are likely to be in and around the littoral**

The seizure of a beach for the concentration of the assaulting amphibious or follow-on forces has always been a risky proposition, and technological advances in surveillance, stand-off precision firepower, and anti-access and area-denial assets have only increased that risk. Amphibious forces might instead focus principally on generating operational manoeuvre directly in stride from the sea-base – in other words, to bypass the beach both physically and conceptually. In modern and unconventional operations, training and resolve must also be backed by a
high-readiness approach so that rapid action can be mounted to protect or evacuate key UK assets and personnel or to dislocate insurgent forces before they can consolidate their position. Experiences in Sri Lanka drew suggested that small raiding parties need to have support close at hand in the event that operations failed.23

Small raiding parties need to have support close at hand

The need to generate this desired readiness, forward presence and operational manoeuvre across all the environments of the littoral highlights a number of necessary revisions to current force design and structure, something that other nations are already adapting to.

International Approaches

Most significantly, key economic and political competitors are paying increased attention to their amphibious capabilities, with Australia, Spain, Japan, Brazil, India, Mexico, Canada, Korea and South Africa – to name a few – all investing resources in establishing, developing or expanding their capabilities in this area.24 This observation can be confirmed by considering developments in the US, Singapore, Australia and Japan in particular:25

In navies across the world, there is a distinct movement away from the battalion as the principal component of capability for amphibious response towards engagement at the company level (somewhere between 100 and 120 personnel). That company group, configured with a range of bespoke capabilities, including enhanced understanding and command capabilities, might well become the principal output of an afloat force to achieve missions ashore.26 This is in part a reflection of the lack of ships, helicopters and landing spots, communications facilities and offload capabilities and connectors with which to deploy, manoeuvre and sustain brigades and battalions. However, it would also implicitly acknowledge the fact that in today’s conflicts it is difficult to bring to bear the full combat capabilities of brigades and battalions against the target array presented by the opposition.27

The days of assembling large formations of naval infantry at home and then dispatching them en masse to a conflict zone have passed. The new concept – yet to permeate the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) – is that forward-deployed elements of various sizes will rapidly aggregate as a crisis develops and task-organise (that is to say, change their make-up specifically to address the task to which they are assigned) to deliver operational effect, before once again dispersing. The USMC is probably alone in retaining the forces necessary to undertake brigade-level amphibious operations at the most challenging end of the spectrum of conflict – which is the full militarised assault of a beach defended by a near-peer rival. At the same time, however, it also recognises that the casualty rate would be enormously high and therefore such a large-scale assault should only be undertaken in the most extreme circumstances.28 This is a major shift in emphasis for the world’s only military superpower.

A more pragmatic and limited approach to the development and retention of an amphibious capability – moving away from the formation-level capability – is being pursued by countries such as Singapore, whose armed forces have collectively been directed to develop a capacity to transport one division (10,000 men), albeit without the funding or training required to enable an operation at such scale. The Australian model, announced in 2012, takes a similar platform-centric approach to the development of an amphibious capability.29 Large-scale investments in amphibious platforms (such as the former British landing platform RFA Largs Bay in 2012) provided a strong signal that Australia intended to play a stronger role in the region.30 Whilst the short-term message was aimed at demonstrating political resolve to play a wider regional role, the investments allow for an expansion of the capability to support key allies and back political decisions with military force.

In Japan, meanwhile, the development of an amphibious capability has been designed for a single purpose: to effect a small-scale, high-risk, non-discretionary assault against known target geography, such as the Senkaku Islands, which are under dispute with China. Unsurprisingly, the design of the Japanese amphibious force is far more limited and defined than if it had been intended for more flexible employment worldwide, across the spectrum of conflict.31

Differing international approaches to amphibious capability thus show that the development of forces in this area is tied into distinct national interests. Investments obviously correspond with what nations want to achieve in today’s complex environment, with most opting for a more flexibly designed force that recognises the limitations of what can be achieved in the littoral environment.

The development of amphibious forces is tied to distinct national interests

What Does this Mean for the UK?

In determining its own requirements for amphibious capability, the UK is no different. In its calculations, London must balance national defence commitments and obligations across the globe in economic, diplomatic and defence terms, as well as acknowledging the country’s unique geographic position. In light of such considerations, it could be argued that the forward elements of any British joint force could usefully be built upon a balanced amphibious force capable of delivering political ends by exploiting the full array of military tools – available nationally as well as from allies and partners – but centred on a seaborne force with global reach and an ethos that sees opportunities in complex and chaotic environments.

However, this approach would clearly not enable an effective response to every possible form of conflict (for example, in large-scale armoured conflicts ashore), while the cost,
complexities and limitations of lift capacity, medical, logistics and support, and forward-deployment cycles must all be acknowledged.

Critics often highlight the costs of such operations

That said, the most common recourse of critics is simply to highlight the high cost of amphibious operations – even successful ones – as well as the significant failure of a number of previous large-scale landings in order to expose the risks inherent in attempting to seize occupied or opposed beaches. Although such arguments serve to emphasise the issue of scale, the case being made in this article is for the regeneration of a balanced amphibious force capable of smaller-scale interventions across the spectrum, and so this angle of criticism has little relevance or potency in this instance.

Indeed, the scale of the British amphibious capability is relatively slender, particularly compared to that of the US; this in itself casts doubt on the assertion that the UK retains a sovereign theatre-entry capability and is thus capable of executing such high-cost, large-scale operations. It also raises fundamental questions whether a force of 1,800 Royal Marines could seize and control a port facility of sufficient size to enable the in-flow of follow-on forces in the face of even moderate anti-access/area-denial capabilities and ashore opposition – such as those presented by various countries across the Middle East, for instance. Instead, the scale of UK amphibious capability suggests that it might be designed best so that it meets the wider mission set in operations other than war that lie between peacetime training and engagement and war-fighting, such as hostage rescue, delivery of aid, interdiction and intelligence gathering. This would require a shift in the language and understanding of amphibious operations across Whitehall to ensure that these forces are enabled to make best use of new capabilities and technologies.

Amphibious Operations in Contemporary Warfare

Military and political attention in Whitehall continues to be focused on expeditionary, light-footprint, forward-engagement interventions to prevent and contain a range of humanitarian and security challenges. Interventions on this level are best suited to the frequent and irregular challenges posed by the heady mix of non-state actors – insurgents, for example – proxy actors, criminal activity, and tribal and cultural disputes. Even seemingly conventional state-on-state competitions, such as those in Georgia and Ukraine, show that conflict occurs in an all-encompassing web of political, trade, alliance and resource connections that make direct military responses extremely challenging.

Upstream conflict prevention, meanwhile, eschews large traditional military formations, and instead favours the combination of highly trained capacity-building teams for indigenous forces, and humanitarian assistance or early crisis-intervention capabilities, engaged constantly and over a longer timeframe. For the US, these capabilities routinely involve the blending of special operators, air power, forward-deployed USMC Marine Expeditionary Units, regional allies and even private contractors. Against this background of persistent activity, direct action by special forces and missile strikes against high-value targets become just a small part of a deeper, longer-term, politically determined strategy developed in close collaboration with diplomats, development workers and other actors tasked with collaboratively delivering comprehensive approaches much more closely akin to so-called influence operations than direct military action.32

Such early interventions are so small in scale that there is little room for error. As such, the most critical resource is human capital: talented, adaptable professionals who are not only capable of operating and self-sustaining in small groups in uncertain conditions, but who are as capable of cultural understanding and interpersonal relationships as they are of combat.33

The current force of choice for those British politicians faced with emerging crises is the country’s special forces, which as a result routinely find themselves overstretched due to high demand for their niche capabilities. Some of the factors that make special forces such an easy choice are: high readiness; ease of deployment; small footprint in theatre; easily sustained at range; highly trained; multi-skilled; easily recovered; and an ability to integrate and communicate well with other international and indigenous forces. Given that amphibious forces also possess many of these attributes, and indeed they are already widely employed in crisis prevention and early intervention – either in support of or as a supplement to special forces – it is clear that they should also be considered by decision-makers faced with the choice of which force to deploy in response to a crisis. Certainly, the ethos of British amphibious forces makes them highly suitable to performing this role and rather than focusing on making a brigade- or Commando-sized (battalion) formation available on a limited or occasional basis, lower-level but persistent forward presence could be developed to deliver broad elements of the amphibious spectrum at high readiness.

The UK’s special forces are routinely overstretched

Furthermore, a ‘light-footprint’ amphibious force could be very useful in the many circumstances or conditions that lie between the largely theoretical extremes of peace and war. Indeed, the routine and enduring value of amphibious forces could well be found in the regular employment of their unique capabilities at scales well below that of the archetypal in extremis role of an afloat brigade seizing a theatre-entry objective for follow on forces. In this case, brigade-level theatre-entry – a capability already put at risk (in terms of readiness to conduct operations) by London in being held at extended readiness – could well become a driver of force design that is secondary to the generation and forward deployment of the light-footprint
force until threat levels warrant a return to the more traditional model.

**Naval forces have long played a central role in British grand strategy**

The method proposed in this article of operating the inherently joint, light amphibious force in a dispersed manner for both protection and manoeuvre effect not only reflects the lessons of history – for example, in Indonesia in 1963 – but also embraces an innovative attitude to emerging technology and threats. By revisiting the way in which defence and security professionals consider lethality, firepower, sustainability, resilience and risk, a fundamental shift is made from a focus on formations and platforms to a more flexible and independent capability structure that meets the goals of senior political and military leaders. A corresponding shift from fixed formations to an ability to aggregate on demand would also make UK doctrine consistent with current US concepts and practice.

**The Critique**

Thus, the evidence in favour of the utility of amphibious forces seems considerable; nonetheless, they should not be regarded as the solution to every conflict and engagement that a nation may undertake. Certainly, they cannot replace army formations for armoured warfare or deterrence against peer competitors, nor do they have the skills of special forces to conduct discrete assassinations. There are also more significant considerations that must be acknowledged when discussing amphibious operations in general. Medical cover, logistics, lethality, technology, duplication of forces for tasks, and lift capacity are important factors to consider when understanding the balance of investment in and utility of amphibious forces in the future. However, these factors can be overcome both by drawing support from the UK Joint Expeditionary Force, their historical links to the USMC with its more significant enablers, and a change in thinking on the part of political and military leaders in terms of risk, cost and experimentation with technology.

**Conclusions**

Naval, and specifically amphibious, forces have played a fundamental role in national British grand strategy for centuries. The delivery of deterrence, coercion, persuasion, compellence, sanctions, punishment, retribution and protection of national interests has been well served by naval and amphibious power in terms of outcome, cost-benefit and fungibility. More often than not, the traditional arguments for the utility of such forces have been based on the idea that formation-level capabilities are needed to make a clear statement of national intent. However, a more careful examination of their historical utility indicates a much wider use of amphibious forces at smaller scale for a much broader range of political purposes than full-scale invasion. Despite this, amphibious forces still seem to be defined by their four main war-fighting functions of assaults, demonstrations, withdrawals and raids, rather than the full range of expeditionary missions required in the complex crises of the modern littoral, for which their inherently joint, integrated air, sea and land capabilities clearly make them uniquely suitable.

The UK is finding it increasingly difficult to understand or influence the countries, economies and political arrangements of the modern world. Its strategy has become much more reactive; however, the location and nature of the next emergency is increasingly uncertain and reactions to it are driven as much by the calls of the media as by any coherent view of British interests. To mitigate the effects of these problems, amphibious forces have the strategic mobility to provide persistent, forward regional presence and engagement; the operational mobility to be re-assigned to and aggregate around an emerging crisis; and the tactical mobility assets to manoeuvre in a complex littoral, employing force elements that can deliver effect while ensuring force protection through their relatively small size and dispersed mobility and basing. The new reality is that the ability to engage quickly but with little risk of entanglement in the pre-conflict environment is likely to have increasing value in the eyes of national leaders – and amphibious forces meet these requirements.

Early engagement is a much more political activity than a military one, and is characterised by a greater focus on perceptions, influence activity and human factors than previous military experience would indicate. The amphibious spectrum posits the future utility of such forces at the less-than-kinetic stages of engagement. Forces, especially those employed at an early stage of a crisis, need different skills and understanding in order to engage successfully. It is simply not enough for armed forces to manoeuvre, maim, rend, kill and capture any more. The commando ethos of highly engaged, forward-deployed, self-sustaining forces, capable of projecting sovereign power at range and within the critical time window for action, is unique to amphibious forces. They therefore represent the critical element in future British engagement, and one in which previous UK governments have sensibly invested significant resources.

The **commando ethos is unique to amphibious forces**

The UK has of course previously placed amphibious capabilities at the core of foreign-policy engagement – but there is evidently a very real disadvantage in retaining only a single, high-value naval striking force to conduct operational-level raiding. Primarily, this is rooted in the political reluctance to gamble a unique, prized asset, and military reluctance to allow the force to be broken down into smaller, discrete and more usable raiding elements. In this regard, some might consider that today’s Joint Expeditionary Force is in some ways similar to the Naval Striking Force of 1939–43. The much more valuable model to consider, however, is that which underpinned the commando carrier period from 1956 and 1966, when amphibious forces became the main ‘go-to’ tool of British foreign policy in the Middle and Far East. The arrival of the new carriers, F-35 aircraft
and a range of new C4ISR capabilities may herald the ability to return to such an amphibious-focused doctrine across the Joint Expeditionary Force.

Critics of the amphibious capability generally focus on the most limited, high-end interpretation of it, pointing out the high levels of investment in specialist amphibious platforms required to provide a formation that is of limited utility to high-risk war-fighting contingencies. It is true that beach landings are rarely going to be necessary in the contemporary geopolitical environment, particularly at brigade scale. However, successive governments have made repeated and effective use of smaller-scale amphibious forces for a range of political and security missions, and the amphibious platforms, equipment and personnel the UK already has could readily be employed in this manner again. Certainly, in light of historical experience and the variety of new global security challenges that daily present themselves, a further reduction in amphibious forces below their already low levels seems a somewhat reckless option.

The further objection that 3 Commando Brigade has spent the last decade working not as an amphibious formation but as a two-unit land formation in Afghanistan, and that it has not yet come up with a new recapitalisation or operating concept since its return, must also be acknowledged. The small-scale, annual amphibious deployments currently conducted by the UK do not match with aspirations of a fully deployable amphibious capability at the scale needed to achieve influence and effect on a national scale. From this position, trying to defend the utility of amphibious capability by reference to a limited, formation-level, backwards-looking historical or doctrinal line of argument does little more than make the case for good mothballs and plenty of warning time to resurrect a force capability which was once relevant, but which has little serious utility in an operating environment now dominated by short notice and multilayered conflicts in the densely populated littoral.

It is the nature of modern crises and conflicts that establishes the operating requirements for military forces. In today’s environment, there is now ample opportunity for re-structured and responsive amphibious forces to spearhead the British response to these challenges; but this will first require their transformation into flexible, high-readiness, tailored, highly skilled, manoeuvrist, high teeth-to-tail ratio expeditionary forces capable of operating globally on an austere footing. Such forces would deliver a light footprint with focused lethality, and would be strategically deployable from amphibious platforms already available. The transition to smaller, more frequently forward-deployed and capable force elements that rapidly engage with emerging crises as part of a renewed command ethos would allow amphibious forces to demonstrate regular utility to national leaders; moreover, it would do so in a way consistent with the new language and concepts of British foreign policy. As part of an integrated joint forces structure, amphibious forces could once again become the government’s principal tool of foreign-policy security engagement.

It is true that such changes might require significant additional investment to make them a reality; adapting the Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers to make them true commando carriers would be resource-intensive, for example. However, at a time of financial austerity for the armed forces, achieving perfect force design might not be necessary. The inherently innovative and adaptive nature of the British amphibious model can operate extremely effectively in imperfect conditions. That consideration alone increases their utility immeasurably.

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Notes

3 Ibid., Part 2, para. 3.
7 The National Archives, DEFE 2/1900, ‘A Short Review of the History and Development of British Amphibious Warfare’.
10 See coverage of ‘downsizing exercises’ by the US Department of Defense during the Clinton and Obama administrations in Allan R Millett, Semper Fidelis: The


14 Speller and Tuck, Amphibious Warfare.


