

## **Pursuit of naval capability heads Blair, Howard in different directions**

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Tony Blair seems set to cut the Royal Navy in half, while John Howard is planning the biggest peacetime expansion in Australia's naval capability in 100 years. The two men have marched together in the war on terrorism, but they apparently think very differently about strategic and defence policy. Who is right?

The differences have been highlighted in recent weeks as the British press reported plans to mothball up to 19 of the Royal Navy's 44 warships and cancel orders to build two big aircraft carriers. British fogies of all ages are going apoplectic at the prospect that France will then have a bigger navy than Britain. Nelson stirs in his marble tomb. The hero of Trafalgar might feel more at home in Australia.

John Howard's Government is buying two large amphibious ships, each three times the size of the ships they replace, and three air warfare destroyers, which will be the largest, most capable and most expensive warships Australia has bought since the 1950s. They will also entail the most complex and risky shipbuilding project Australia has undertaken.

Why the difference between old allies who boast so much of their shared values and traditions? The most obvious reason is that, notwithstanding their close alignment in the war on terrorism, Blair and Howard see the world differently. Blair, on defence policy last month, said: "September 11, 2001, changed everything." For him, apparently, the era when armed forces were built to fight conventional wars is over. In future, he said, Britain's military role would be to fight a global campaign against Islamic extremism.

Blair talked about Africa and the Middle East, but not a word about Asia, where the growth of China and India, and the transformation of Japan, raises new strategic questions. Not even a word about Russia, whose future relations with Europe seem so uncertain.

Howard, too, is committed to the war on terrorism, but his commitment is qualified and counterbalanced by two greater concerns: instability in our neighbourhood, and the risks to the future strategic balance in Asia posed by the rise of China, India and Japan.

Australia's defence policy is especially driven by concerns about the future stability of Asia. Even after five years of continuous deployments on stabilisation operations in the Middle East and in our backyard, most of Australia's defence spending still goes to the high-tech air and naval forces that constitute insurance against the breakdown of stability in the wider Asian region.

The latest demonstration of this has been the Government's surprising decision to shop for 25 new F-18F Super Hornet aircraft at a cost of probably more than \$4 billion. That is a clear sign of its determination to sustain Australia's regional air-combat and strike superiority even if (or when) the Joint Strike Fighters it has committed to buy arrive late.

Seen this way, the contrast between Britain and Australia looks stark. But when we look a little more closely the differences narrow, and questions emerge. First, Blair's Government is not so insouciant about the future global strategic balance between powerful states as his speech suggests. Though billed as a headline address on Britain's defence future, it glossed over the biggest and most expensive defence decision his Government has made - the decision to replace Britain's ageing nuclear forces with a new generation of warheads, missiles and submarines at astronomical cost - £20 billion or more.

Britain is updating its nuclear forces because it recognises that the stable international order we now enjoy is not etched in stone. Seen this way, Blair's naval cuts reflect not so much a complacent view of global stability as a decision that nuclear weapons are a most cost-effective way to protect Britain's traditional strategic interests.

The nuclear option is not so readily available to Australia as it is to Britain. But that does not mean we have nothing to learn from the Brits. Howard and his advisers might like to ponder why the British have decided that traditional naval capability, based in traditional frigates, destroyers and aircraft carriers, is no longer a cost-effective choice for high-level conventional conflict.

The answer is painfully plain. Surface ships are large, slow, easy to find and easy to sink. They are very expensive and carry lots of people. As sensor and weapons systems have improved, warships have become more and more vulnerable. As a result warships have been jammed full of more and more systems to defend themselves. That has made them more and more expensive, and has kept their crews large.

And all to no avail. Surface ships remain vulnerable. In a conflict against any adversary armed with modern aircraft, anti-ship missiles, sea mines and submarines, a warship today is not an asset but a liability. This is a problem even for the US Navy. Late last year a Chinese submarine surfaced a few kilometres from a US aircraft carrier, close enough to have fired a salvo of torpedoes. Britain's defence planners may have been paying closer attention to all this than Australia's.

So maybe Blair is a better strategic thinker than his speeches make him out to be. And maybe Howard should get on the phone and have a talk to him about defence planning. The heirs to Horatio Nelson may know more about the future of naval warfare than we do.

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