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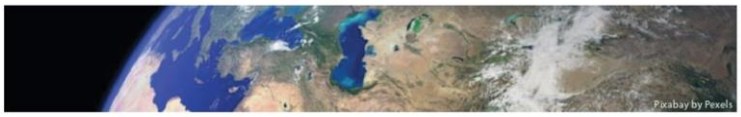

THE CRISIS OF THE ROYAL NAVY

Structural Decline, Global Consequences, and Repercussions

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Introduction

For centuries the Royal Navy has been the mainstay of British sea power and the guarantor of a global empire. Today, however, it is in a state of structural crisis without parallel in its modern history. The historian Mark Felton, in a recently published analysis, documents rigorously how decades of defence cuts have reduced the Royal Navy to a fleet incapable of fulfilling its core missions, with consequences that extend far beyond the borders of the United Kingdom.

The state of the fleet in 2026

By March 2026 the Royal Navy has 63 commissioned ships, but only 25 can be considered actual combat units: submarines, aircraft carriers, destroyers and frigates. The remainder consists of support vessels, patrol ships and patrol craft, technically armed but not classifiable as warships in the strict sense. A fleet of this size would barely be

sufficient for a small state with exclusively territorial commitments; the problem is that the United Kingdom still maintains about 15 overseas territories—from the Falklands to Gibraltar, from Bermuda to the Cayman Islands—and participates in military operations on a global scale.

The historical comparison is unforgiving. In 1996 the Royal Navy had 17 submarines, 3 aircraft carriers, 15 destroyers and 22 frigates. Thirty years later, in 2026, the combat fleet numbers 10 submarines, 2 aircraft carriers, 6 destroyers and 7 frigates: less than half, despite largely unchanged operational commitments. The operational reality, however, is even more alarming than the aggregate figures, because the majority of these units are immobilized for maintenance, refit, or sea trials.

The nuclear–strategic submarine component is paradigmatic. The four *Vanguard*-class ballistic-missile submarines are supposed to ensure continuous at-sea deterrence, with one on patrol, one in training, one in refit, and one in trials. Yet, as the vessels age, refits are lengthening. In 2023 *HMS Vanguard* returned to service after seven years of overhaul. By 2026 *HMS Victorious* has been in refit for at least three or four years, leaving effectively only three submarines to do the work of four. Patrols have stretched from three to four months, with clear strain on the crews. It is reasonable to assume that for certain periods only two units are fully operational. These vessels deploy with serious maintenance problems simply because continuous at-sea deterrence cannot be interrupted.

The attack-submarine force is even more critical. The Royal Navy has six *Astute*-class attack submarines, but in March 2026 only one is operational: *HMS Anson*, currently deployed in the Middle East. The other five are all immobilized for refits, long-term maintenance, or pre-operational trials, with *HMS Agamemnon* not expected to enter full service before March 2027. Thus, the entire conventional submarine fleet relies on a single attack submarine.

The surface fleet is in a similar condition. Of the two aircraft carriers, only *HMS Prince of Wales* is operational, kept at high readiness for the Middle East but without adequate escort; *HMS Queen Elizabeth* is in dry dock at Rosyth undergoing extensive repairs to her propulsion systems. Of the six destroyers, only two—*HMS Dragon* and *HMS Duncan*—are active in March 2026; the other four are out of service undergoing multi-year refits or scheduled maintenance. The seven *Type 23* frigates present a marginally less severe picture: five are operational, but all are elderly and without assured replacements. *HMS Richmond* will be retired in 2026 after 31 years of service, with no replacement in sight. The operational gaps are filled by the *River*-class offshore patrol vessels: seven ships of under 2,000 tons, armed only with guns, which perform tasks equivalent to those of frigates and destroyers from the Mediterranean to the Falklands and the South Pacific. This is an implicit admission of the fleet's structural insufficiency.

Geopolitical consequences

The decline of the Royal Navy entails far-reaching geopolitical consequences that transcend British borders. For centuries British naval supremacy has guaranteed freedom of navigation, the security of trade routes, and stability in strategically important areas. A navy incapable of deploying meaningful forces in response to regional crises marks a historical break that neither allies nor adversaries can fail to notice.

Within NATO, British weakness erodes the credibility of the United Kingdom's contribution to collective defence. Maritime projection has traditionally been Britain's main added value within the Alliance; with a fleet reduced to a handful of operational vessels, this value erodes dangerously. European allies and the United States may reassess the weight they assign to London in joint strategic planning, with the risk of gradual marginalization of the country in decision-making forums.

On the bilateral plane, the naval contraction alters the balance with nations that have historically looked to Britain as a bulwark against regional expansionism. The overseas territories become potentially vulnerable: Argentina has never renounced its claims over the Falklands, and a weakened naval deterrent could revive ambitions thought to have been laid to rest. In the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, where the United Kingdom maintains bases and strategic interests, the reduced capacity for rapid response turns every crisis into a more risky bet.

On a global scale, the vacuum left by the Royal Navy is filled by emerging powers. China is expanding its navy at a sustained pace, with an increasing number of aircraft carriers, destroyers and nuclear submarines. The reduction of British naval presence in the Indo-Pacific, the Atlantic, and the Mediterranean creates spaces that Beijing is ready to occupy. The maritime "Silk Road" finds more fertile ground where Western presence weakens, and "gunboat diplomacy"—however anachronistic the term—remains a concrete reality: those unable to project naval power negotiate from a position of relative vulnerability.

Strategic consequences

On the strategic plane, the decline of the Royal Navy compromises both nuclear deterrence and the conventional capacity to respond to crises. Continuous at-sea deterrence—the cornerstone of British national security—requires that at least one ballistic-missile submarine always be on patrol. With the *Vanguard* boats operating with serious defects and enduring lengthy refits, this principle risks being violated during periods that are not declared but may be detected by sophisticated adversaries, with destabilizing effects on the perception of the strategic balance.

In the conventional sphere, the shortage of attack submarines and surface combatants leaves the Royal Navy technically incapable of conducting operations on multiple fronts simultaneously. With only one attack submarine and two operational destroyers, in the case of simultaneous crises—for example an escalation in the Middle East while tensions increase in the South Atlantic—the United Kingdom would be forced to choose which theater to abandon. The aircraft carriers, investments of six billion pounds, risk being transformed into expensive, vulnerable targets rather than strategic assets: a carrier without an adequate battle group is a limited threat and an attractive target for any adversary equipped with anti-ship missiles or submarines.

The lack of redundancy feeds a vicious cycle affecting crew training. With so few ships operational, training cycles shorten or stretch irregularly, undermining personnel readiness and increasing the risk of operational accidents. On the industrial side, the shrinking fleet endangers the entire naval-defence supply chain: shipyards, weapons-system suppliers, and research centres depend on regular orders to maintain skills and production capacity. The construction of the new *Type 26* and *Type 31* frigates and the *Dreadnought*-class ballistic-missile submarines requires a robust industrial base, which erodes each year without adequate investment. "managed decline" has become an operational reality, compelling Britain to rely more and more on allies and thereby reducing its decision-making autonomy.

Maritime consequences

The maritime consequences of this crisis are immediate and tangible. About 80 percent of the volume of global trade moves by sea: the routes traversing the English Channel, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf and the Pacific are vital to the British economy. A navy incapable of patrolling these waters regularly leaves space for piracy, illicit trafficking, pollution and hostile intelligence activities. With only seven combat surface vessels operational, the Royal Navy's capacity to guarantee the security of commercial routes is drastically reduced.

The protection of the overseas territories is perhaps the most evident vulnerability. The comparison with 1982 is illustrative: at that time the Royal Navy deployed to the Falklands two aircraft carriers, eight destroyers and 16 frigates, while still maintaining global commitments. Today it could barely assemble one carrier, two destroyers and five frigates, stripping other areas of their assigned forces. The UK's territorial waters, exclusive economic zones and fishing areas require a sustained presence that the *River*-class patrol vessels cannot guarantee against significant military threats.

On the plane of asymmetric threats, the reduction to a single operational attack submarine deprives the Royal Navy of its primary capability for undersea intelligence gathering, communications interception, and surveillance of sensitive areas. Likewise, the security of critical underwater infrastructure—communication cables, gas pipelines, oil pipelines—has become an increasingly important priority, as demonstrated by suspicious incidents in the North Sea and the Baltic. A fleet pared down to the bone cannot guarantee the patrol or rapid-intervention capacity that this protection requires, threatening Britain's energy security.

Conclusions

Mark Felton's analysis of the Royal Navy in 2026 offers a lesson that goes far beyond the purely British military sphere. A combat fleet halved over thirty years, a single operational attack submarine out of six, two destroyers out of six, strategic units that steam to sea with serious defects: this is not the outcome of a deliberate, rational strategic choice, but the product of decades of poor management and consequent decline. It is also a warning for other navies, including the Italian *Marina Militare*, that sacrificing national security on the altar of short-term budget savings makes recovery practically impossible.

For the United Kingdom, the recommendations are clear: decisively reverse course through sustained, long-term investment in the Navy, accelerate and adequately fund the *Type 26*, *Type 31* and *Dreadnought* programmes, and reform strategic planning by abandoning the illusion that a shrunken fleet can sustain global commitments. For Italy and its European allies, the British situation is a cautionary tale: maritime security is not a luxury, but an absolute necessity, whose erosion generates costs that in the long run far exceed the price of adequate investment in defence. The Royal Navy, once master of the seas, risks becoming a marginal force. Preventing this outcome is in Britain's interest, if it wishes to demonstrate once again the traditional capacity to "rule the waves."

Fonte: *Felton, Mark. "The Shocking State of Britain's Navy 2026". Mark Felton Productions, YouTube.*