

# What are the consequences of a Royal Navy missile gap?

By Dr Alexander Clarke PhD

Recently the Government has announced that the Royal Navy will lose its Harpoon Anti-Surface Missiles in 2018, and despite the announcement about working with France that system is not due for service entry till 2035 (if the Perseus programme passes its 2020 transition from Concept to Assessment Phase). This means there will be, at the least - if unusually for a defence project, and especially a joint multi-national project it runs to time - a 17 year 'capability holiday'.

- 17 years where the RN's warships have to rely on guns as they did in WWII for sinking other equivalent ships and attacking land targets.
- 17 years where they will be outranged not just by Russia or China, but by those well-known major naval powers Sweden, South Africa, Bangladesh and Bahrain to name just a few!
- 17 years of relying upon allies for a major capability in a world where the recent election of Donald Trump, the Brexit result, and the events in Ukraine all illustrate how quickly the international landscape can change.

There are very real consequences for Britain in this scenario, because without the ability to engage ships, is there any point in building them? Warships are useful for many things besides, but they are built to fight wars – building warships but not fitting them with the necessary capabilities is like paying the mortgage but not the insurance.

Other navies will be keeping Harpoon going, it may not be as capable in comparison as it used to be; but as a consequence of the lack of investment in naval forces by the West in recent years, it is still a lot better than nothing - especially as an upgraded Block II variant is already scheduled to enter service with the US Navy in 2017, the RN could feasibly 'piggyback' on this project and use it to cover the 17 years.

The other option would be to use Tomahawk missiles, after all the RN's subs already carry them, so would not be difficult to integrate into operational planning. Furthermore if the MK 41 vertical launch system (a US designed standardised missile housing/launching system primarily for ships) are installed on the Daring class (which in that great British Treasury tradition, are 'Fitted For, But Not With'; an acknowledgement such capability is necessary, but they only want to pay for it when they have to, i.e. once the shooting has started most likely) then they, and the Type 26s which are also supposed to be fitted with the MK41 VLS, would carry the same. Usefully such an enhancement would also be very practical in terms of giving an actual enhancement to the RN's capability spectrum – which is why it may not happen.

Such a capability increase for the surface fleet could well be seen by a service, used to seeing cuts on almost any justification, as a threat to both the F35 buy and the SSN buy; sections which themselves have already been cut to beyond the barest minimum.

This is what happened not just to the RN, but to all our forces – to use the quote from the beginning again, if the national economy is the mortgage, then surely defence, as with all the emergency services are the insurance. As a nation the UK has since before the end of the Cold War, been increasingly reliant upon third-party insurance, on the support of others. It could well be that successive governments have already gone too far, in the case of anti-surface missile ‘capability holiday’ it would certainly have done so.

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