

The Franco-Russian Naval Threat in British Naval Thinking, 1899-1906: A Reappraisal

This article focuses on the relationship between the threat perception analyses of the British Admiralty and the strategic orientation of the Royal Navy at the outset of the twentieth century. The current view is that this was an era when fear of France and Russia drove British naval policy. However, as this article will show, Britain's Naval Intelligence Department formed a low opinion of French and Russian naval capabilities at this time and this negative evaluation exerted considerable influence over decision-making. The belief that, owing to multiple qualitative deficiencies, these powers could definitely be beaten in battle lessened the standing of the Franco-Russian naval challenge and freed the Admiralty to consider the danger posed by other possible enemies, most notably Germany.

One of the key drivers of naval policy, particularly in periods of heightened great power tension, is threat perception. Determining who one's most likely adversaries are and exactly what challenge these putative opponents pose naturally has a direct bearing upon the magnitude, direction and extent of the measures taken to provide

security against them. While something of a truism, this relationship between threat perception and strategic orientation has considerable significance for naval historians, for it suggests that the naval policy of a country can only be properly understood if the menace against which it is directed is correctly identified both in terms of its origin and its form. Thus, for those eras when the exact threats that most worried particular countries is a matter of dispute among historians, significant interpretative differences will inevitably also exist about the nature of the maritime security policies that their governments put in place. One period for which this is particularly applicable is the opening of the twentieth century. Was this an era, as some historians contend and others dispute, when Britain's Royal Navy was realigned away from global challenges to face a new enemy in the North Sea? Or was some other paradigm at work?

The way in which the British Admiralty perceived the nature of the challenges to Britain's maritime security in the fifteen years prior to the First World War has recently undergone extensive reconsideration. Whereas it was once held that from 1900 onwards German naval expansion had a profound effect on British naval thinking, ultimately raising 'the German Navy to the undisputed role of

the Royal Navy's ranking potential adversary',¹ a new view now exists that prior to 1906 Germany was less significant in Admiralty planning than had once been assumed. Instead of giving primacy to the so-called 'German menace', many historians now argue that in the period from 1900 to 1906, France and Russia remained, as they long had been, 'the greatest danger to British maritime interests', with the result that the British naval leadership, if it thought about Germany at all, only did so 'in the context of worries that Germany might join a Franco-Russian combination against Britain'.² As one prominent advocate of this viewpoint has explained, the German challenge 'was not the focal point of British naval policy, but one of several major concerns.'³

¹ Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow. Volume 1: The Road to War, 1904-1914* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1961), p. 110.

² Nicholas A. Lambert, 'Transformation and Technology in the Fisher Era: The Impact of the Communications Revolution', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 27 (2004), 273. See, also, Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Last Tsar: British Policy and Russia, 1894-1917* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1995), pp.120-1.

³ John Tetsuro Sumida, 'British Preparation for Global Naval War, 1904-14: Directed Revolution or Critical Problem Solving?', in Talbot C. Imlay and Monica Duffy Toft (eds.), *The Fog of Peace and War*

This scaling down of the place of Germany in Admiralty thinking and the renewed emphasis on the Franco-Russian challenge has become a major plank in a new 'revisionist' interpretation of British naval policy in the pre-First World War decade. Gone is the primacy of the Anglo-German naval race and in its place stands a new edifice based upon British preparations for 'a global naval war against a superior combination of powers' of which the Dual Alliance constituted the core.⁴ Flowing from this it has been suggested that the major reforms of the Fisher era, including the decision to base home defence on flotilla craft and the protection of the sea lanes on battle cruisers, were measures aimed at France and Russia. While there is much to be said for this view, which offers an important global alternative to many long-held Germano-centric assumptions, an intriguing paradox lies at its heart. Whereas one might expect such an analysis to be grounded in research demonstrating that Admiralty assessments of the threats to Britain's worldwide interests came from France and Russia, this is not the case. Instead, the thesis is based upon a downgrading of the influence on Admiralty thinking of one very particular European threat, namely the German navy. While, by default, this elevates the

Planning: Military and Strategic Planning under Uncertainty (London: Routledge 2006), p.126.

⁴ Ibid.

importance of France and Russia, it is not an approach that offers anything new about how the British naval authorities viewed the fleets of the Dual Alliance. Yet, if a fresh look at Germany's role can produce such a radical reinterpretation, it stands to reason that a new assessment of how the Admiralty regarded France and Russia might be similarly fruitful and should be undertaken. This article will do this. In the process, it will suggest that, notwithstanding France and Russia's status as Britain's principal political rivals in the early years of the twentieth century, at a purely military level, the Admiralty was less convinced about the quality of the naval challenge posed by their fleets. Some implications of this will also be explored.

I.

While it is generally accepted that the French and Russian navies were the Royal Navy's main adversaries at the start of the twentieth century, the question of how effective a military challenge they presented is rarely posed. However, in hindsight it is clear that neither individually nor collectively did they represent the mortal danger that is sometimes supposed.

The judgement of scholars who study the French and Russian Navies – rather than Admiralty perceptions of them – is that these forces exhibited significant weaknesses. Starting with Russia, its

failings were evident from the top down. Russia's naval administration was byzantine in complexity and notoriously inefficient with a strong undercurrent of corruption. As a result, proposals for naval development, while often extremely elaborate, were frequently hampered by the differing priorities of competing state agencies determined that their unique vision should be the one implemented. In particular, squabbles over future ship designs between fleet commanders, ship constructors and the Naval Technical Committee were common and introduced long delays into the design and building process. Another problem was that even when plans were finalised, they often exceeded the capability of the country's naval shipbuilding industries to deliver them. Inadequately capitalised, with too few slips capable of launching the largest warships, and with bottlenecks in armour and ordnance manufacturing, Russia's naval infrastructure simply couldn't build major warships at more than a snail's pace, which insured that ships, many of which were poorly designed to begin with, were often outdated upon arrival.⁵ And these were not the only problems. Maintenance schedules were frequently in arrears. There were insufficient opportunities for the officers and men to get regular

⁵ The *Evstafi* class are a good example: ordered in 1903, they entered service in 1911. Stephen McLaughlin, *Russian and Soviet Battleships* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 2003), pp.147-9.

sea training, even supposing that they wished to do so, which many did not, and there were shortages of specialist personnel in the most technical branches of the service. There were also difficulties maintaining morale and discipline among the conscripts who formed the majority of the common sailors, with the consequence that efficiency often suffered. Consequently, while pockets of excellence existed in the Russian Navy, the whole was less impressive than the sum of its parts.⁶

The French navy was considerably better. The sailors were well trained; the officers were enthusiastic and dedicated. Indeed, such was the interest of French officers in their vocation that it was from their ranks that there arose many of the most interesting developments in naval strategic thinking of this period. Innovative ideas about fast surface craft, the deployment of torpedoes and the utility of commerce warfare all originated in France. Ironically, this vibrant intellectual ferment was also responsible for the most significant impediment under which the *Armée Navale* laboured, namely its inability to form a clear and consistent view about the

⁶ Nikolai Afonin, 'The Navy in 1900: Imperialism, Technology and Class War', in Dominic Lieven (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Russia, Volume 2: Imperial Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2006), pp.578-80.

strategic path it should follow. Each of the new ideas that emerged had its dedicated advocates who were determined to see their new tenets put into practice and countervails suppressed. Hence, the French navy became the testing ground for whichever group found itself in control. As power changed hands frequently in France, this meant regular alterations in outlook for the navy. The impact this had on warship construction was especially profound, as it prevented consistent long-term building programmes. Such plans as were introduced were generally subject to multiple and radical modifications with each change in ministry, a process which produced long delays in bringing ships into service and ensured that, when they did finally arrive, there were wide variations in their characteristics, even within ships that were nominally of the same class. Consequently, French naval materiel was the least homogenous in the world. However, this merely reflected a more general confusion about what the French Navy was for. Some, notably the adherents of the *Jeune Ecole*, believed that it should concentrate on commerce warfare (*guerre de course*), while others placed the greatest emphasis on fighting battles against foreign fleets (*la grande guerre*). Ultimately, constant oscillation between the two prevented proper preparations for either eventuality.⁷

⁷ Paul G. Halpern, *The Mediterranean Naval Situation 1908-1914* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP 1971), pp.47-52.

These individual weaknesses meant that neither the French nor Russian navies were fit to take on Britain single-handed. Of course, the real fear was that they would unite – a junction most plausible in the Mediterranean, ‘the vital strategic Centre of Britain’s position’⁸ – and attack Britain jointly, when their combined force would be comparable in size to the British fleet likely to oppose them. However, if the French and Russian fleets had individual weaknesses, collectively they were even less promising. Here were two services with different cultures, traditions, languages, command structures, equipment and materiel. They rarely had an opportunity to meet, let alone to undertake meaningful joint exercises; the idea that if suddenly united they could form a cohesive fighting force was fanciful. If artificially assembled, there was every prospect that they would prove more of a hindrance to each other than a source of strength. The French certainly thought so. Their naval staff opposed joint operations on the grounds that the Russian squadrons ‘are so poorly handled that their cumbersome mass could do nothing but weigh down and paralyze our own.’⁹ The Russians

⁸ Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1988), p.154.

⁹ Theodore Ropp, *The Development of a Modern Navy: French Naval Policy, 1871-1904* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1987), p.242.

felt likewise; Admiral Lomen argued that without knowledge of French planning and tactics, such joint operations were best avoided.¹⁰

Of course, while this litany of weaknesses is apparent today, the question is: was this understood by British naval authorities at the time? The answer is that it was.

Starting with Russia, some outstanding recent scholarship by Nicholas Papastratigakis has demonstrated that, while the Admiralty expressed considerable anxiety over the Russian challenge up to the mid-1890s, when reliable information on the true prowess of the Russian navy was scarce, by the start of the twentieth century this respect had subsided in the face of improved intelligence about Russian capabilities.¹¹ Dispatches on the state of Russia's naval infrastructure by British naval attachés were numerous in this period and far from complimentary. As early as February 1898, Captain Alfred Paget had reported that attempts to strengthen the Russian Pacific

¹⁰ Nicholas Papastratigakis, *Russian Imperialism and Naval Power: Military Strategy and Build-up to the Russo-Japanese War* (London: I.B.Tauris 2010), p.225.

¹¹ Nicholas Papastratigakis, 'British Naval Strategy: The Russian Black Sea Fleet and the Turkish Straits, 1890-1904', *The International History Review*, 32 (2010), 647-53. Unless otherwise indicated all quotations in this section are taken from this article.

squadron were being marred by shortcomings in Russia's shipbuilding industry. 'Russian yards,' he elaborated, 'are not capable of shipbuilding quickly enough what is required.' He was not alone. Captain Hugh Williams, who compiled a series of reports on the Russian navy between December 1899 and June 1900, similarly emphasized the flaws in Russian warship procurement. In addition, Williams was also sceptical about the quality of Russian naval personnel. Russian naval cadets, he reported in August 1900, do not enter the service by choice, but because their parents wish to be free of the 'expense of their sons' education and maintenance'. Accordingly, 'the romance of sea life', which played so big a part in the Royal Navy was lacking in Russia, causing a 'want of enthusiasm and zeal' among the officers, who avoided sea service where possible and looked upon a foreign posting as 'only another name for exile.'¹² Captain Charles Ottley, who surveyed Russian capabilities in 1901 and 1902, concurred. Russia, he noted, did not possess enough large building slips to facilitate a rapid naval expansion. He also doubted the efficiency of the Black Sea Fleet, which suffered from materiel that was both obsolescent and worn out. Moreover, 'secret dockyard scandals and wide-spread misappropriation of naval funds and stores are said to

¹² Report by Williams, 12 August 1900. [Kew, United Kingdom, The National Archives]: ADM[iralty papers] 1/7483.

be rife', a situation not helped by the fact that the head of the navy, General-Admiral Grand Duke Alexei Alexandrovich was 'an indolent optimist'. Ottley concluded:

much ... still remains to do before the Black Sea Fleet could give battle to a squadron of modern ships of equal numerical strength with much hope of success. The whole Fleet ... must be re-armed and probably re-boilered. Even then the heavy clumsy vessels of the three turret design, with their low freeboard, and unarmoured secondary batteries would fare badly in an action in even moderate weather.... To pit them against our Mediterranean Fleet Battleships would be very imprudent, and this I think Russian Naval Officers fully realise....¹³

Little had changed by 1903, when his successor, Captain Somerset Calthorpe, offered his assessments. Efficiency, particularly in the Black Sea Fleet, which was laid up on a 'care and maintenance' basis for eight months every year, was poor. 'Even during the 4 months of commission,' Calthorpe added, 'the Fleet still do comparatively little sea work, and so it is clear that they should not be, and most certainly are not at the present time, able to compete ship for ship with any of

¹³ Report by Ottley, 1 January 1902. TNA: ADM 1/7555.

our Mediterranean Fleet in the efficiency of their personnel.' Nor was this all: he pointed to battleships with ancient ordnance and worn boilers. Hence, the likelihood of a junction between French and Russian forces in the Mediterranean struck him as remote:

It is very questionable whether with their existing Black Sea Fleet, the Russians would attempt to come out at all into the Mediterranean and assume the offensive. ... In fact, it is probable that the ships in question are too weak and too slow to come out (even if allied to France) ... to face the British Force in the Mediterranean.

Accordingly, it was not to be feared: 'under existing conditions, this fleet cannot be looked upon as a very effective ally to an enemy of England'.¹⁴

This slew of negative intelligence proved influential. After reading the dispatches by Williams, Rear Admiral Reginald Custance, the Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI), became convinced that the Russian threat had been overstated:

¹⁴ Report by Calthorpe, 8 January 1903. TNA: ADM 1/7621.

These reports are valuable and contain information on many points on which we have hitherto been in want of accurate knowledge. It is impossible to read these despatches without being impressed by the conviction that the Russian Navy is an artificial production incapable of standing up against a prolonged struggle at sea.

The strength of the Russian Fleet is not founded on extensive shipbuilding yards and on a large mercantile marine manned by a great sea-faring population. On the contrary, the Government Dockyards appear to be indifferently managed and the private yards are of no great capacity. The Fleet is manned by officers and men who are little at sea and for the most part dislike going afloat.

On this basis, Custance noted with satisfaction that 'in this instance the work before us is not so formidable as had been anticipated', before concluding that it was evident why 'Russia is now afraid of Japan.'¹⁵ Ten months later he even argued that a sortie by the Russian Black Sea fleet into the Mediterranean, a prospect previously feared, was actually eminently desirable as it would allow the Russian forces

¹⁵ Minute by Custance, 10 September 1900. TNA: ADM 1/7472.

to be 'engaged and rendered incapable of further mischief.'¹⁶ As he explained on another occasion, since Britain's goal was 'to defeat and crush the Russian fleet ... we shall not wish to prevent them coming out' of the Black Sea.¹⁷ He clearly entertained no doubts that victory would belong to Britain.

Intelligence reports similarly highlighted the deficiencies of the French navy. The political vicissitudes that made it impossible for the French naval authorities to chart a consistent course were well known to Britain's naval attachés. As one explained, the French navy was encumbered by 'frequent change of Government, which means not only many different Ministers of Marine, but Chiefs of Staff as well, who delight in countermanding all the orders of their predecessors for the purpose of introducing their own ideas.'¹⁸ The damage this caused was systematically catalogued. In 1899, Henry Jackson reported that, although a well-defined long-term construction programme had been promulgated in 1896, it was now evident that, with a new minister in place, it was unlikely to be carried out: 'a change has already been made in policy and the design of the vessels projected in the 1896

¹⁶ Papastratigakis, 'British Naval Strategy', 652.

¹⁷ Memorandum by Custance, 21 March 1901. TNA: ADM 116/866B.

¹⁸ Arthur J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power* (New York: Alfred Knopf 1940), p.188.

programme, and it is very doubtful if it will ever be completed in its entirety'.¹⁹ Such 'vacillating plans and divided councils', as another termed this, were all too common in the French system.²⁰

Nevertheless, for a brief period at the turn of the century, with the appointment for three years of Jean de Lanessan as Minister of Marine this problem appeared solved, enabling something of a naval renaissance. As Captain Douglas Gamble, the naval attaché, explained:

the present ministry has remained in power for a longer period than has usually been the case ... and this fact has tended to a great extent in establishing a continuous Naval policy, the Minister of Marine having been able to formulate a settled programme of construction spreading over a period of six years...²¹

However, in 1902, disaster struck: Lanessan was replaced by Camille Pelletan. The two had diametrically different views. While the former advocated a policy of engaging enemy battle fleets, his successor

¹⁹ Report by Jackson, 30 March 1899. TNA: ADM 231/29.

²⁰ Report from 1902. TNA: ADM 231/36.

²¹ Report by Gamble, 3 September 1901. TNA: ADM 1/7534.

wanted to abandon battleships and concentrate on cruisers and submarines. This change did not go unnoticed. Ottley, the new naval attaché, reported:

Pelletan regards Fleet Actions as things to be by all means avoided; M. de Lanessan ... distinctly contemplates such Fleet Actions as inevitable Pelletan looks on the French Colonies as an incubus, a sort of hostage to fortune given by France, which she could but ill afford. M. de Lanessan urges on France 'Commerce and Colonial Expansion' as the new discovery which is to restore her to her place and ensure peace and prosperity to her people. M. Pelletan deems speed the most valuable property a warship can possess. M. de Lanessan says that speed is of all factors that go to make up the fighting efficiency of a ship, *that which is most illusory.*²²

It was an intractable dispute with clear implications, not the least of which derived from Pelletan's decision to reverse as many of his predecessor's decisions as possible. This was disastrous, throwing the navy into chaos and delaying by years the completion of the

²² Ottley to DNI, 13 February 1903. ADM 1/7600.

battleships ordered by Lanessan. That such a change was bound to be damaging was evident to the British naval attaché:

[France] is but half way through with a huge programme, which has no other *raison d'être* than the vigorous prosecution of *La Grande Guerre Navale*. None of the ships are completed, but three quarters of them are voted or on the stocks. To change her faith now would be to stultify her own judgement, a clear confession of apostasy disastrous enough in itself, but fraught with huge penalties also in the shape of millions wasted, an illustration, on a gigantic scale of the folly of 'swopping horses when crossing a stream.'²³

Clearly, the revolving door of the French government had sowed confusion once again and the British knew it.

Added to the political difficulties that prevented the French from following a consistent strategic vision, there was scepticism within the Admiralty about the quality of French ships, which, in addition to their lack of homogeneity, had numerous design flaws. One was their short range. As Jackson reported, the poor radius of action of their cruisers was 'one of the great weaknesses of the French Navy', one that even

²³ Report from 1902. TNA: ADM 231/36.

French politicians acknowledged.²⁴ Another related to armour protection. A dispatch by Gamble, noting that France's Admiral François-Ernest Fournier was convinced of the superiority of his battleships over all others on account of their being 'more powerful' and more capable of surviving a 'pounding ... by reason of their complete armour belt', was greeted with derision by Sir William White, Britain's eminent Director of Naval Construction. 'The opinion attributed to Admiral Fournier,' he countered, 'ignores the fact that the thick belt armour of the French ships is practically "awash" when they are [in a seaway]; while above it the only protection consists of thin side armour....' White went on that British gun shields were at least equal to the French ones, while British barbets offered superior protection to those on French ships. To compound this defensive advantage, White also noted that the Royal Navy had a 'considerable superiority in the time occupied in loading heavy guns.'²⁵ It was a scathing analysis.

When it came to French sailors, British observers were generally complimentary. Nevertheless, it was felt that the personnel of the Royal Navy were superior. Gamble explained:

²⁴ Report by Jackson, 30 March 1899. TNA: ADM 231/29.

²⁵ Report by Gamble, 24 July 1899. TNA: ADM 1/7482.

What the French officers principally lack is practical work and the habit of taking command and assuming responsibility, especially in their younger days; They are therefore rather over cautious and much less daring than are our junior officers as a rule and could not be compared to them as captains of destroyers or torpedo boats in war time.

Senior officers are older than are ours of the same standing and they do not get the practice of handling ships that ours do: they are probably not so well accustomed to rough weather and hardships either.²⁶

With critical reports received on both the French and Russian navies, it is little wonder that the fear of a conjunction of the two fleets diminished in the British naval leadership. As early as 1898, the Admiralty informed the commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean that he should have no difficulty disrupting moves by France and Russia to combine:

The attempt by the Fleets of France and Russia operating from bases 2000 miles apart to form a junction in the Eastern Basin of the Mediterranean (the former short of coal) would be a very

²⁶ Report by Gamble, 3 September 1901. TNA: ADM 1/7534

hazardous experiment which should result either in your crushing the Russians in the Levant before the French could reach them, or in the combined [British Mediterranean and Channel] Fleet destroying the French before a junction could be effected.²⁷

Custance's appointment as DNI in 1899 cemented these views. He did not believe that there was much danger of such a union. The Russians, he wrote in September 1900, could be deterred from entering the Mediterranean by the placement of no more than equivalent forces in their way. Six months later, he added that Franco-Russian cooperation would be hindered by the Russian fear of operating 'far from their base in the Black sea' and that in any case 'mutual jealousies and differences ... will probably mar their united action.'²⁸ Selborne, the First Lord, agreed: 'I believe ... that we are at this present moment in such a position that we ought certainly to defeat France and Russia.'²⁹

This confidence that Britain's fleets would outperform those of the Dual Alliance and retain command of the sea was matched by a

²⁷ Admiralty to C-in-C Mediterranean, 26 October 1898. TNA: ADM 1/7379B.

²⁸ Minute by Custance 2 March 1901. TNA: ADM 1/7516.

²⁹ Minute by Selborne, 23 March 1901. Ibid.

belief that the Royal Navy was more than capable of dealing with any threat to the nation's commerce. That the French in particular intended to target British trade was well known in the Admiralty, not least because the naval attachés frequently reported this. Jackson, for example, wrote in March 1899 that of the six elements that made up France's 'present policy in the event of a war with England', heading the list was: 'Destruction of British commerce in all parts of the world; in distant seas by very fast cruisers, *Guichen* class; nearer home by fast armoured cruisers...'³⁰ In April 1901, Gamble, submitted the text of a prize-winning essay by a French officer on 'the naval requirements of France' that had 'commerce destroying' at its heart. As he explained, this mirrored official policy: 'The plan of commerce destroying tactics in far distant seas fairly well agrees with the information on this subject which I have obtained....'³¹ This insight into prospective French strategy was accepted by the Naval Intelligence Department (NID), but caused little anxiety. In response to Jackson's assessment, Sir Lewis Beaumont, the DNI, remarked: 'So long as our ships are at least equal to those of the enemy in speed and fighting power, and we have sufficient numbers, it is believed that the

³⁰ Report by Jackson', 30 March 1899. TNA: ADM 231/29, p.10.

³¹ Gamble to Director of Naval Intelligence, 6 April 1901. TNA: ADM 1/7518.

opportunities for successfully attacking this commerce are no greater now – if so great – than they were in the past.³² Similarly, Captain Doveton Sturdee, the assistant DNI, noted on Gamble's report that, while the French could certainly render the Mediterranean impassable to British trade, in outlying areas, such as China and the Indian Ocean, French commerce destroying 'ought easily to be met and stopped'.³³ This was also the view of Custance, who regarded France's 'whole policy of armoured cruisers to be quite unsound and not likely to lead to any real result to us if we only take ordinary precautions.'³⁴ Hence he concluded: 'the probable amount of loss is not believed to be so great as is commonly supposed.'³⁵ This remained the judgment in future years: in 1903 it was argued before a Royal Commission that attacks on trade would be contained because Britain had built or building a greater number of armoured cruisers than its opponents.³⁶

³² Marder, *Anatomy*, p.338.

³³ Minute by Sturdee, 24 April 1901. TNA: ADM 1/7518.

³⁴ Custance to Bridge, 13 June 1902. [Greenwich, United Kingdom, National Maritime Museum]: Bridge Papers, BRI/15.

³⁵ Custance, 'Food Supply in Time of War', 15 July 1901. TNA: ADM 1/7734.

³⁶ Admiralty, 'Memorandum on the Protection of Ocean Trade in War Time', October 1903, pp.9-10. TNA: CAB[inet papers] 17/3.

If the Admiralty were confident that their existing dispositions would ensure victory against the Dual Alliance, the question arises: who was perturbed by the prospect of having to fight these navies? The answer was the admirals who would have borne this responsibility, namely the Commanders-in-Chief in the Mediterranean. The officers who filled this post were habitually more concerned by this possibility than their superiors in London. However, this was a natural reflection of the role they filled.

Among the higher echelons of the Royal Navy there existed a distinct and important division of labour. Overall responsibility for the global management and strategic direction of British naval policy lay with the Admiralty. The members of this body, ably assisted by the NID, first determined where the main threats to British interests lay and then, on the basis of this evaluation, distributed the country's naval assets between the nation's various fleets and squadrons, the precise balance of strength between them reflecting the Admiralty's view of the strategic priorities of the day. However, having once made this allocation, the Admiralty devolved local control to their respective Commanders-in-Chief, who were charged with developing an informed opinion of the exact dangers to British interests within their respective stations and devising, in consultation with the Admiralty, the best means of meeting them.

This division between the holistic assessment of all threats and the parochial consideration of specific, geographically localised dangers inevitably encouraged relations between the Admiralty and C-in-Cs abroad to develop along particular lines. Specifically, it ensured a constant tension between general and section interests and normalized a continuous dialogue to resolve this. This played out in a predictable way. Fleet commanders being concerned with those security issues that were likely to arise within their specific patch were naturally inclined to prioritize the problems that they faced and for which they bore responsibility to the exclusion of all others. That being so, they had every reason to magnify the difficulties in their particular area and to ask for a greater share of the country's limited resources in order to address them, irrespective of any implications this might have for naval defence elsewhere. Requests for additional ships and more men were, thus, commonplace in the letters sent from C-in-Cs to the Admiralty. However, the Admiralty, being concerned with all Britain's global security needs, was normally supremely unimpressed by such lobbying. As one Senior Naval Lord put it:

It must always be borne in mind that the pleading of the Commander-in-Chief on any Station must be to some extent 'ex parte' [and] it is only natural that he should regard the general

policy to be pursued, from the point of view of its bearing in his own particular part of the world, and very largely to the exclusion of consideration of others. It is for the Board to discriminate.³⁷

For this reason, no less frequent than the pleas emanating from individual C-in-Cs for extra resources were communications from the Admiralty expressing their unwillingness to overturn their carefully considered arrangements in order to satisfy some local need that in their view was outweighed by more pressing demands elsewhere.

Given this dynamic, it was entirely to be expected that the Commanders-in-Chief in the Mediterranean, whose job it was to worry about France and Russia, should press the Admiralty on this, the most urgent issue for their station. And they did. At the outset of 1898 this post was held by Sir John Hopkins. Two factors relating to war with the Dual Alliance troubled him. First was the alleged superiority in speed of the French cruisers over those under his orders, a superiority which he believed would allow the French to attack British merchant vessels with impunity. They would, he explained, 'give us a great deal of

³⁷ Kerr to Selborne, 7 May 1901. D. George Boyce (ed.), *The Crisis of British Power: The Imperial and Naval papers of the second Earl of Selborne, 1895-1910* (London: Historians' Press 1990), p.120.

trouble from our inability to bring them to action when at sea.³⁸ Second was his belief that the combination of the French Toulon Fleet with the Russian Black Sea Fleet, a union that he was sure would be affected, was superior to the forces under his command. 'This may be looked upon as a fully sufficient force to cope with the French alone,' he wrote, 'but barely enough if Russia is also our enemy and allied to France'.³⁹

In 1899, Hopkins was replaced by Sir John Fisher. No sooner had he taken command than he informed the Admiralty that the forces at his disposal were too weak. 'The Combined English Channel and Mediterranean Battleship Squadrons,' he opined in a paragraph similar to the one penned by his predecessor, 'are admittedly only sufficient to cope effectually with the French Toulon Fleet alone'. He called for 'an immediate reinforcement, therefore, of 8 or 9 battleships from England'.⁴⁰ This would be the first of many such requests. Moreover, like Hopkins, Fisher also expressed concern about France and Russia's armoured cruisers. In a reversal of the position he had held only a few years previously when he had sat on the Board of Admiralty as Controller, he now argued that these foreign cruisers outclassed their

³⁸ Hopkins to Admiralty, 27 January 1898. TNA: ADM 1/7376B.

³⁹ Hopkins to Admiralty, 5 April 1898. Ibid.

⁴⁰ Fisher to Admiralty, 1 November 1899. TNA: ADM 1/7417.

British counterparts.⁴¹ As he explained, 'the Russian armoured cruiser *Gromoboi* ... would simply mop up all other classes of cruisers....'⁴² Similarly: 'when the French get vessels of the type of the *Jean d'Arc* and *Montcalm* class to sea, we shall have a difficult task to deal with them effectually.'⁴³ In short he exhibited the same fears as his predecessor. But, then, such fears were characteristic for the commander of this station.

The response of the Admiralty was equally predictable: it was dismissive of both their pleas. The fear of fast French and Russian armoured cruisers, which as we have seen was not shared to the same degree in the Admiralty, was repudiated on the grounds that the performance of these vessels had been greatly exaggerated.⁴⁴ The

⁴¹ Fisher, 'Remarks on Criticisms of Designs of New Cruisers of the First and Second Class', undated [April 1895], in *Notes for Navy Debates, 1896-97*. Portsmouth, United Kingdom, Admiralty Library.

⁴² Fisher to Selborne, 8 May 1901. TNA: ADM 121/27.

⁴³ Fisher, 'Notes on the Imperative Necessity of possessing fast Armoured Cruisers and their Qualifications', undated [February 1902]. Cambridge, United Kingdom, Churchill Archive Centre: Fisher papers, FISR 5/9, FP4198.

⁴⁴ Memorandum by White, 10 June 1897. TNA: ADM 116/46. Minute by White, 25 February 1898. TNA: ADM 1/7376B.

high speeds ascribed to them, it was said, were unlikely to be true or, if true, could only be obtained by forcing the boilers, an action which would limit the time that these speeds could be maintained. Added to that, many of the vessels mentioned had not yet been completed and doubts existed, given everything known about France and Russia, that they would be finished according to schedule. In any event, Britain was building superior vessels in larger numbers, which would be finished on time, and this would suffice to neutralize this threat. The Senior Naval Lord minuted: 'when these French and Russian vessels are ready for service we shall have an ample number ready to deal with them – that is the point for consideration.'⁴⁵

As for the request for reinforcements, the Admiralty was willing to do what it could, but it was not moved by the claims of inferiority, which many regarded as exaggerated. After receiving one of Fisher's missives on the weakness of his fleet, Lord Selborne wrote with evident ire: 'it is very aggravating to have to argue with men who ... exaggerate so systematically as Fisher.... The kind of balance sheet they draw up between us and the French and Russians is one, in which we have no assets and the other party has no liabilities, which is absurd.'⁴⁶ In a similar vein, the new Senior Naval Lord, Lord Walter

⁴⁵ Minute by Sir Frederick Richards, 19 March 1898. Ibid.

⁴⁶ Selborne to Curzon, 19 April 1901. Boyce, *Crisis*, p.113.

Kerr, responded to another of Fisher's harangues by questioning the admiral's state of mind. 'The Commander in Chief', he noted, 'appears to be by nature credulous,' accepting 'as fact whatever he hears'. As a result, he had 'worked himself into a state of apprehension as to the hostile intentions of France and Russia, who he seems to credit with being always on the watch to fall upon him without any provocation and at a moment's notice.' The reality was different: 'The question of the strength of the fleet ... has been very fully considered Nothing has yet arisen to necessitate a change....'⁴⁷ Little wonder that in their formal correspondence to him the Admiralty typically informed Fisher that they believed the existing disposition of forces would enable him to deal with any likely scenario:

2. with reference to the main fleet, Their Lordships intentions are that it should assemble at Gibraltar, and that sufficient reinforcements should be sent from England to make it strong enough to crush the Toulon Fleet if it comes out at full strength.
3. The detachment in the eastern Mediterranean should consist of fast ships. Their Lordships intend that it should be strong

⁴⁷ Minute by Kerr, 9 July 1901. TNA: ADM 1/7504.

enough to deal with the Russian squadron if it issues from the Black Sea.⁴⁸

II.

That the divergence of views between Fisher as Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean and the Admiralty as the arbiter of the requirements of all Britain's naval stations was characteristic of the dialogue between a station chief and his superiors has important implications. Logically, it would lead one to expect that when Fisher gave up responsibility for Mediterranean affairs and joined the Admiralty as First Sea Lord, a position that divested him of purely local interests and gave him instead responsibility for Britain's global strategic position, his outlook would change accordingly. Despite this, some historians contend that this was not the case and that the views Fisher formed in the Mediterranean about the danger of France and Russia not only remained with him, but are key to understanding his reforms as First Sea Lord.⁴⁹ Indeed, the argument that the Admiralty did not set much store by the German challenge rests partly on the

⁴⁸ Admiralty to Fisher, 19 Feb 1900. TNA: ADM 1/7417.

⁴⁹ Charles H. Fairbanks, jr., 'The Origins of the Dreadnought Revolution: A Historiographical Essay', *The International History Review*, 12 (1991), 271.

belief that, under Fisher's leadership, the Royal Navy 'expected that the next war would be fought on the world's oceans protecting British shipping from marauding squadrons of French or Russian armoured cruisers', a view Fisher formed when serving in the Mediterranean.⁵⁰ It has further been suggested that it would be 'paradoxical' if Fisher, who had spent several years focusing on the Franco-Russian threat in the Mediterranean and whose constant cajoling had been responsible for the reinforcement of Britain's forces there, should have subsequently abandoned these beliefs and devoted his efforts to building up the Royal Navy in the North Sea against Germany.⁵¹ Yet, when consideration is given to the way in which a naval officer's outlook is shaped by the particular responsibilities of his post, there would, in fact, be nothing 'paradoxical' about Fisher concentrating from 1899 to 1902 on the Dual Alliance and then discarding this single-minded focus upon the assumption of new duties. This is exactly what occurred.

Fisher's departure from the Mediterranean and his appointment on the Board of Admiralty produced many changes in his outlook. For example, he now adopted the Admiralty's stance on the proper division

⁵⁰ Nicholas Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press 1999), p.177

⁵¹ Ruddock F. Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1973), p.236.

of responsibility between station chiefs and the naval authorities. In contrast to his period in the Mediterranean, when, by his own admission, he had 'harassed ... blackguarded ... and persecuted' the Admiralty for some three years, he now demonstrated that he would not truck similar behaviour.⁵² Thus, when the Commander-in-Chief of the Channel Fleet, Lord Charles Beresford, began asserting, much as Fisher had once done, that he had too few ships in his command, Fisher was clear that Beresford's demands had to be rejected, because

if acceded to ... it means that the Board of Admiralty will abdicate its functions and take its instructions from an irresponsible subordinate, who is totally unacquainted with the world requirements of the British navy and is only thinking of magnifying his own particular command....⁵³

⁵² Fisher to Mrs Neeld, 22 February 1902. Arthur J. Marder (ed.), *Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone* (3 Volumes, London: Cape 1952-9), I, p.229.

⁵³ Admiralty, 'The Home Fleet and Admiralty Reforms', undated [printed January 1907]. Admiralty Library: Naval Necessities IV.

One cannot imagine Fisher expressing such views when in the Mediterranean; yet, he would make many such utterances as First Sea Lord.

Commensurate with this prioritising of the holistic over the particular, Fisher adopted a more measured assessment of the Franco-Russian threat. This was despite the fact that at the very moment he became First Sea Lord the prospect of Britain having to fight France and Russia seemed closer than ever. The outbreak earlier in the year of the Russo-Japanese War, a conflict that pitted Britain's ally, Japan, against France's ally, Russia, had opened up the unwelcome possibility that alliance obligations might drag Britain and France into the war on opposing sides, the recently signed *Entente Cordiale* notwithstanding. When Russian warships fired on British fishing vessels in the North Sea this prospect came nearer still. Yet, if Fisher faced the genuine possibility of war with the Dual Alliance, this did not mean that he regarded this eventuality with the alarm that he had maintained when in command of the Mediterranean. On the contrary, it is notable that, with Fisher at the helm, Admiralty assessments of the Russian and French navies far from moving in the respectful direction of Fisher's 1899-1902 appraisals, if anything declined further.

In the case of Russia, the opinion of Tsarist naval competence reached a new low. Nothing demonstrates this better than the

correspondence between the Admiralty and Beresford concerning the latter's plan for dealing with the Russian forces in his vicinity in the event that Britain joined the war on the side of Japan. Such was Beresford's confidence in the superiority of his ships that, on grounds of 'chivalry', it was his professed intention to engage the Russians with only half of the force at his disposal. The Admiralty were horrified, but, revealingly, this was not because they disagreed with Beresford over how easily the Russians could be defeated; rather they worried that if it became known that a British fleet could overcome its opponent with half its ships watching on, this would have a detrimental effect on future funding. Taxpayers, wrote DNI Charles Ottley, a former attaché who had seen the defects of the Russian navy first hand, 'would probably enquire why they were paying for the other half'. Fisher concurred. 'Lord Nelson's dictum,' he wrote, 'was "the greater your superiority the better" and he was a chivalrous man!' Accordingly, Beresford was admonished for allowing sentiment into his calculations, but not for the calculations themselves.⁵⁴

Appraisals of France, while less dismissive, did not suggest that the prospect of an Anglo-French conflict caused much anxiety among the naval authorities. On the contrary, expectations of a British victory

⁵⁴ Beresford to Admiralty, 2 December 1904 and minutes by Ottley, 26 April 1905, and Fisher, 3 May 1905. TNA: ADM 1/7729.

were high. Should such a struggle occur, wrote Ottley, 'the burden of war would ... be pressing more heavily upon France than ourselves.' Indeed, the war would lead to such 'financial distress' in France that this alone might 'force them to surrender'. His reason: 'the inevitable disappearance of French sea trade during the continuance of hostilities while our own was remaining relatively intact.'⁵⁵ This diagnosis, with its assumption that the French mercantile flag would be forced from the seas, but British commerce would continue unabated, is especially important because it provides ample ground for thinking that roving French armoured cruisers, although a source of concern for Fisher in the Mediterranean, were little feared when he was at the Admiralty.

Following the Russo-Japanese War, such assessments became more pointed. After the annihilation of Russia's Far Eastern and Baltic Fleets, Fisher produced a searing indictment of Russia's maritime prowess:

The Russian navy has ceased to exist. It cannot again become formidable in less than ten years, and no one can tell what will be the condition of Russia ten years hence. If the present *régime* survives, the Russian navy, whatever its paper strength, will

⁵⁵ Memorandum by Ottley, undated [before 12 July 1905]. TNA: ADM 116/3111.

probably be as rotten ten years hence as it was a year ago, before it ceased to exist. In any case, it will be a negligible quantity for a long time to come.⁵⁶

Equally, he was conscious of the problems that beset the French Navy. One memorandum pointed to the huge waste in the French naval budget consequent upon the enormous number (33,128) of non-combatants in the French navy. This was a 'monstrous ... misdirection of public money', but one that was hard to remedy. 'A whole generation of French naval officers and politicians have pointed to the evil and urged the paramount importance of cutting down this "army corps of dockyard labourers"'. But the men have votes, and the canker is not easily eradicated.⁵⁷ Then, there were flaws in French ship designs. Although Britain was building Dreadnoughts, France was continuing to construct battleships with mixed calibre armament, a situation guaranteed to make their new warships obsolescent on

⁵⁶ Admiralty, 'The Question of Further Naval Economies', undated [Printed January 1906]. Portsmouth, United Kingdom, R[oyal] N[avy] M[useum]: Tweedmouth Papers, I.

⁵⁷ Admiralty, 'Report of the Navy Estimates Committee', 16 November 1905. CAC: FISR 8/6, FP4709.

completion.⁵⁸ And this was not all. Further problems were soon revealed, including defects in the powder used in French munitions that led to spontaneous magazine explosions and the destruction of some French ships. 'The poor French,' Fisher wrote, 'are all over the place, for which I am very sorry – their personnel, their discipline, their powder and their ship-designing and their dockyards all adrift....'⁵⁹ These, one may note, were the very same navies whose prowess he had formerly elevated. Such was the alteration brought about by the passing of four years and a change in office.

III.

The question arises: what impact did these more realistic assessments of French and Russian efficiency have on Fisher's thinking? While in the Mediterranean, Fisher had advocated meeting threat from the Dual Alliance, as he then saw it, through the incorporation of ever more warships into his command. However, as First Sea Lord he had to

⁵⁸ See, 'Remarks of the Director of Naval Ordnance. Comparison of French Proposed Design and HMS *Dreadnought* as regards Gun Power', in Admiralty, 'The Balance of Naval Power, 1906', undated [Printed April 1906]. Admiralty Library: Naval Necessities, IV.

⁵⁹ Fisher to Prince of Wales, 16 October 1907. Marder, *FGDN*, II, p.147.

balance the needs of the fleet facing France and Russia in the Mediterranean with the requirements of stations facing other foes in different regions. In this context, he was not minded to implement the policies that he had proposed to the Admiralty when he had been its supplicant rather than its directing influence. Instead he advanced a radically different approach to France, namely an alliance. As C-in-C in the Mediterranean, he had tentatively suggested this to some of his contacts in the press. One was James Thursfield:

I have always been an enthusiastic advocate for friendship and alliance with France. They have and never will interfere with our trade. It's not their line and, really, we have no clashing of vital interests. ... But we have not been politic toward them. The Germans are our natural enemies everywhere! We ought to unite with France and Russia!⁶⁰

Another was Arnold White:

The German Emperor may be devoted to us, but he can no more stem the tide of German commercial hostility to this country of ours than Canute could keep the North Sea from wetting his

⁶⁰ Fisher to Thursfield, 29 November 1901. Ibid, I, p.218.

patent-leather boots! It's inherent. Their interests everywhere clash with ours....

If you turn to France – in absolutely nothing do we clash, *and never can clash*. We hate one another (or rather it is only they who hate us) because 'Perfide Albion' is taught in their (French) nurseries... I am perfectly convinced, if the matter was properly engineered, and the Press of both countries interested in the subject, we should have a vast change, and both enormously to the advantage of France and ourselves.⁶¹

While Fisher had not then been in a position to advocate this idea formally, on his return to Britain he began to push the point with greater vigour and from within the centres of power. The best known example is a letter from 1904 to Edward VII's private secretary, Lord Knollys, in which Fisher exclaimed that 'France is the *one* country we have got to be friends with!'⁶² However, a more significant illustration comes from January 1906. This was an important moment for Fisher. When appointed First Sea Lord in October 1904 he was already into his 63rd year and, as admirals retired at 65, this meant that he was scheduled to give up his post in January 1906. However, in December

⁶¹ Fisher to White, 6 August 1902. *Ibid.*, pp.259-60.

⁶² Fisher to Knollys, August 1904. *Ibid.*, p.327.

1905 he was appointed Admiral of the Fleet, a rank that allowed him to serve for a further five years. The implications of this were considerable. Until then, Fisher had pursued the most pressing of his reforms with the utmost vigour, not daring to tackle anything that could not be pushed through immediately. However, at the start of 1906, he suddenly found himself able to advance longer term agendas and push more unusual proposals. One of the latter was his idea of an alliance with France and he immediately seized the opportunity to do so.

In January 1906 an article on the German Navy appeared in the *Fortnightly Review*. Published under the pseudonym 'Excubitor', its gist was that the Royal Navy was strong enough to take on the German navy single-handed. Excubitor, whose identity was allegedly unknown, was described in an Admiralty memorandum as a 'very shrewd and well-informed writer'. In fact, Excubitor was none other than Sir Archibald Hurd, one of Fisher's closest journalistic contacts and most ardent supporters. Fisher regularly supplied him with information and these confidential asides often led to articles by Hurd advocating Fisher's latest approach to the naval problems of the day. It is not known if this particular article was inspired by Fisher but, whatever its

origins, once it had appeared, it was used as the springboard for an Admiralty memorandum advocating an alliance with France.⁶³

The memorandum began by asserting that the foundation of British naval policy was ensuring that 'our Navy must always be strong enough to meet *and beat* any enemies we are likely to encounter.' This posed the question as to who these enemies might be. At that time there were few possibilities:

Japan is our ally and her Navy is an element in our strength on the sea for ten years to come. The United States is a friend with whom we can never afford to quarrel. Italy does not count. She is our friend at all times.... The Russian Navy has ceased to exist.

This left only Germany and France. Owing to the two power standard, the doctrine that stated that Britain should always possess a fleet equal to the combined forces of the next two biggest navies, in the normal course of events, this would mean a British naval construction

⁶³ Admiralty, 'The Question of Further Naval Economies', enclosing 'The German Navy Bill (Being an Article in the *Fortnightly Review*, for January 1906, by Excubitor)', undated [Printed January 1906]. RNM: Tweedmouth Papers, I.

programme designed to build the Royal Navy to the size of the combined Franco-German navies. But, as the memorandum posited, this was only *'so long as we have no definite alliance with France.'* Were Britain to enter into such a compact, France would be able to concentrate all its resources on its army – its true protection against German aggression – secure in the knowledge that Britain, whose fleet, as Excubitor had pointed out, was sufficient to deal with the German navy single-handed, could take care of its naval defence. This would be advantageous for France, the army of which might now more closely approximate to that of its formidable opponent, but it would also help Britain, because it would lead to *'the elimination of the French fleet as a factor in the two-power standard.'* As the memorandum continued: *'The two-Power standard at once becomes a one-Power standard, because there is no longer a second Power which we need to fear....'*

The major barrier was that *'as a nation we are not fond of alliances'*. Nevertheless, while agreeing that *'it is heartily to be wished that we could do without them'*, it was doubted that this was possible any longer. Britain already had an alliance with Japan. Consequently, *'why should we not have a definite alliance with France?'* There was no reason. Indeed, all considerations pointed in its favour:

We have settled all immediately urgent differences, and the two countries are now the best of friends. It is said that we offered France assistance in the dispute with Germany last summer. If we did, we shall have to do so again if the dispute again becomes acute, unless we are prepared to allow the *entente cordiale* to go to pieces, and Germany to win all along the line. It is a very small step from such a situation to a definite defensive alliance, and it would be a very wise step to take.

The case for an Anglo-French alliance, argued so forcefully in January 1906, was reiterated the following month. However, this time the topic was approached from the opposite angle. Instead of a reasoned exposition on the virtues of a full accord with France, the focus was now on the disadvantages of merely sticking to so loose an arrangement as the current *Entente Cordiale*. Such a limited agreement, it was argued, was in no way comparable to a proper alliance and offered few of the advantages of a firm and fully certified friendship. This was especially true when it came to reaping a financial dividend. To those who said that 'our good relations with France ... [were] a reason for whittling down the Navy Estimates,' the Admiralty answer was straightforward: 'such international amenities' as the *Entente* were not to be confused with and did not contain 'the

elements of a binding compact'. The logic of this was apparent: if a formal alliance was not on the cards, the savings that had been proposed in January, which had been made contingent upon such an undertaking, would not be available. This was spelt out unambiguously in the next paragraph:

The Board of Admiralty, as the responsible naval advisers of the Government cannot base their plans upon the shifting sands of any temporary and unofficial international relationship. ... Sentiment may welcome the *entente* ... but prudence must steadfastly refuse to regard it as a reason for reducing the estimates. *Ententes* may vanish – battleships remain the surest pledges this country can give for the continued peace of the world.⁶⁴

Some historians, having read this memorandum in isolation from the January instalment, have suggested that the February document shows that France was still distrusted by Britain's naval leadership and that, therefore, even in 1906 there had been no shift from France and

⁶⁴ Admiralty, 'The Building Programme of the British Navy', 15 February 1906. Admiralty Library: Naval Necessities IV.

Russia towards Germany.⁶⁵ However, as can be seen, this memorandum was really the second part of an evolving argument as to why Britain should deepen its ties with its Gallic neighbour. Mere 'international amenities' and 'temporary and unofficial international relationship[s]', such as the existing *Entente Cordiale*, were no substitute for 'a binding compact' of the kind that had been advocated in January and was still considered desirable.

Of course, no alliance was formalized before the outbreak of war, although the entente with France got ever deeper and Britain did ultimately adopt a naval standard against Germany alone, but the fact that Fisher contemplated such an alliance and that he did so as an antidote to the rise of Germany is significant. It suggests that the idea that he was unperturbed by German naval power prior to 1906 and remained principally concerned by the global threat of France and Russia is not the whole story.

It is further to be noted that, although the alliance proposals got nowhere, the assessment that there was no danger from the French

⁶⁵ Mackay, *Fisher*, pp.328-9; Christopher Martin, 'Un nouveau regard sur la mutations de la Royal Navy au début de XX^e siècle', *Review Historique des Armées*, 257 (2009).

and Russian navies continued to appear. An Admiralty evaluation from October 1906 ran:

Great Britain must ... maintain at all costs command of the sea. Therefore we must be decisively stronger than any possible enemy. Who then is the possible enemy? Ten years ago, or even less, we should probably have answered France and Russia in alliance. As they were then respectively the second and third naval powers, the two-power standard had an actuality which it has since lost. The United States and Germany are competing for the second place which France has already almost yielded. Russia's fleet has practically disappeared. Japan's has sprung to the front rank. Of the four powers which are primarily in question, Japan is our ally, France is our close friend, America is a kindred state with whom we may indeed have evanescent quarrels, but with whom, it is scarcely too much to say, we shall never have a parricidal war. The other considerable naval powers are Italy and Austria, of whom we are the secular friends, and whose treaty obligations are in the highest degree unlikely to

force them into a rupture with us which could in no possible way serve their own interests.⁶⁶

That only left Germany, a country that Fisher would now characterise as Britain's 'only possible foe for years to come!'⁶⁷ Naturally, circumstances could always change, but as the Admiralty pointed out, it was 'slightly absurd' to worry about Britain's 'position in 1920' or beyond and the naval authorities would not be tempted to engage in anything as intangible as 'panic by prophecy'.⁶⁸ In short, with a real German threat in the here and now, the 'paper programmes' of friendly nations were not an issue.

IV.

Throughout the late nineteenth century and into the start of the twentieth, Russia and France were Britain's main geopolitical rivals. Russia's army threatened India; while the combined Franco-Russian navies were comparable in numbers to the Royal Navy. However,

⁶⁶ Admiralty, 'Admiralty Policy. Replies to Criticisms', October 1906. CAC: FISR 8/9, FP4720.

⁶⁷ Fisher to Tweedmouth, 26 September 1906. *FGDN*, II, p.92.

⁶⁸ Admiralty, 'Admiralty Policy. Replies to Criticisms', October 1906. CAC: FISR 8/9, FP4720.

although there is no disputing that this caused considerable anxiety, it is possible to overstate the reaction of the naval hierarchy. The intelligence that reached the Admiralty from the beginning of the twentieth century cast doubt on the idea that France and Russia would join together to challenge the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean, the theatre where such a junction was most to be feared. It also raised questions about the quality of the forces that these potential enemies could deploy. The Russian navy was particularly poorly reviewed and this negative assessment was believed in London. Andrew Lambert has rightly suggested that 'when Japan destroyed the Russian Fleet in 1904-1905 she finished off what little threat the Dual Alliance had ever posed'.⁶⁹ As the evidence has shown, this is not just an analysis made in hindsight; Japan despatched a threat that was not only limited, but had already been judged as such by the Admiralty, whose policy of being 'strong enough to beat France and Russia for certain' had in the

⁶⁹ Andrew Lambert, 'The German North Sea Islands, the Kiel Canal and the Danish Narrows in Royal Navy Thinking and Planning, 1905-1918', in Michael Epkenhans and Gerhard P. Groß (eds.), *The Danish Straits and German Naval Power 1905-1918* (Potsdam: Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, 2010), p.39.

opinion of those most concerned been fully and successfully implemented.⁷⁰

The systematic downgrading of the Franco-Russian menace in Admiralty thinking has considerable historiographic implications. First, it underscores that between Fashoda and Tsushima, the Royal Navy, though not complacent about the Dual Alliance, felt more secure than is often suggested. It was appreciated that Franco-Russian enmity, while real, did not rest on the most solid of naval foundations. Second, it renders problematic the claim that this threat drove Fisher's reforms as First Sea Lord. Upon assuming this office, Fisher was no longer solely preoccupied by this problem in the way he had been as Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, shortly thereafter he would propose a deepening of the Anglo-French entente into a fully fledged alliance in order to make it easier to focus on Germany, a development that clearly shows that, contrary to revisionist claims, there was no Franco-Russian imperative at the heart of his strategic thinking. Thus, while the rivalry with France and Russia may once have been pronounced, in naval terms at least, its relevance had ended earlier than is currently assumed. That other powers and other threats began to be noticed around this time and ultimately took on greater prominence is, therefore, hardly surprising.

⁷⁰ Minute by Selborne, 27 September 1901. Marder, *Anatomy*, p.463.

Bibliography

Afonin, Nikolai, 'The Navy in 1900: Imperialism, Technology and Class War', in Dominic Lieven (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Russia, Volume 2: Imperial Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2006).

Boyce, D. George, (ed.), *The Crisis of British Power: The Imperial and Naval papers of the second Earl of Selborne, 1895-1910* (London: Historian's Press 1990).

Fairbanks, jr., Charles H., 'The Origins of the Dreadnought Revolution: A Historiographical Essay', *The International History Review*, 12 (1991).

Friedberg, Aaron L., *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1988).

Halpern, Paul G., *The Mediterranean Naval Situation 1908-1914* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard UP 1971).

Lambert, Andrew, 'The German North Sea Islands, the Kiel Canal and the Danish Narrows in Royal Navy Thinking and Planning, 1905-1918', in Michael Epkenhans and Gerhard P. Groß (eds.), *The Danish Straits and German Naval Power 1905-1918* (Potsdam: Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt 2010).

Lambert, Nicholas A., *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press 1999).

Lambert, Nicholas A., 'Transformation and Technology in the Fisher Era: The Impact of the Communications Revolution', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 27 (2004).

Mackay, Ruddock F., *Fisher of Kilverstone* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1973).

McLaughlin, Stephen, *Russian and Soviet Battleships* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 2003).

Marder, Arthur J., *The Anatomy of British Sea Power* (New York: Alfred Knopf 1940).

Marder, Arthur J., (ed.), *Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone* (3 Volumes, London: Cape 1952-9).

Marder, Arthur J., *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow. Volume 1: The Road to War, 1904-1914* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1961).

Martin, Christopher, 'Un nouveau regard sur la mutations de la Royal Navy au début de XX^e siècle', *Review Historique des Armées*, 257 (2009).

Neilson, Keith, *Britain and the Last Tsar: British Policy and Russia, 1894-1917* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1995).

Papastratigakis, Nicholas, *Russian Imperialism and Naval Power: Military Strategy and Build-up to the Russo-Japanese War* (London: I.B.Tauris 2010).

Papastratigakis, Nicholas, 'British Naval Strategy: The Russian Black Sea Fleet and the Turkish Straits, 1890-1904', *The International History Review*, 32 (2010).

Ropp, Theodore, *The Development of a Modern Navy: French Naval Policy, 1871-1904* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press 1987).

Sumida, John Tetsuro, 'British Preparation for Global Naval War, 1904-14: Directed Revolution or Critical Problem Solving?', in Talbot C. Imlay and Monica Duffy Toft (eds.), *The Fog of Peace and War Planning: Military and Strategic Planning under Uncertainty* (London: Routledge 2006).