Since the writings of Julian Corbett and Alfred Mahan, naval scholarship has been preoccupied by battlefleets and fleet-versus-fleet engagements. Coupled with the predominance of peer/near-peer competition and ‘third-generation warfare’ in the 20th century, navies have tended to prioritise blue-water capabilities over green- or brown-water capabilities. However, although peripheral, maritime assets have been employed with a high degree of success in irregular conflicts and operations short of war. Conflicts in Vietnam, the Middle East and Sri Lanka have stimulated debate on maritime contributions to counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns.

Yet, once again, policy discourse is refocusing on great power conflict, especially in naval debates. It is important that academics and practitioners do not allow their institutional knowledge or practical experiences of maritime COIN to be lost. This is compounded by the fact that, while direct conflict between states remains possible in bipolar and multipolar systems, irregular wars, proxy wars and operations short of war appear much more likely. Therefore, this article highlights the historical importance of maritime assets within COIN campaigns, and argues that despite the renewed emphasis on the potential for great power conflict in contemporary times, maritime counterinsurgency assets, skills and knowledge must be maintained and honed, rather than cast off to the margins of naval debate.

This article analyses, compares and contrasts maritime strategy and COIN doctrine to illustrate the utility of maritime assets against sub-state threats. Owing to the nature of COIN campaigns, these strategies and doctrines diverge into two categories: population-centric maritime capabilities; and enemy-centric maritime capabilities, including sea-basing, civilian relations, naval gunfire support, blockade and interdiction, and direct action. To illustrate the importance of preserving the ability

1. Peter A Kiss, *Winning Wars Amongst the People: Case Studies in Asymmetric Conflict* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2014), pp. 20–22; Martin N Murphy, ‘The Blue, Green, and Brown: Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency on the Water’, *Contemporary Security Policy* (Vol. 28, No. 1, 2007), pp. 63–79.
2. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, CP 403 (London: The Stationery Office, 2021), p. 70; US Department of Defense, ‘Advantage at Sea: Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power’, December 2020.
3. Mark O Yeisley, ‘Bipolarity, Proxy War, and the Rise of China’, *Strategic Studies Quarterly* (Vol. 5, No. 4, 2011), pp. 75–76.
4. David Kilcullen, ‘Two Schools of Classical Counterinsurgency’, *Small Wars Journal*, blog post, 27 January 2007.
of maritime assets to combat sub-state threats, this article considers arguments regarding force structuring, resource tradeoffs and strategic prioritisation, in light of the shift from irregular to great power conflict.

Using Sea Bases to Conduct Counterinsurgency Campaigns

Under the remit of non-kinetic contributions, maritime assets are increasingly able to contribute to COIN campaigns by forming sea bases. Through the conglomeration of multiple platforms, sea bases generate a flexible, manoeuvrable, afloat command-and-control centre with a capacity for power projection. In turn, these attributes facilitate ‘rapid deployment, assembly, command, projection, reconstitution, and re-employment of joint combat power from the sea’. Therefore, sea-basing is an important tool as it allows counterinsurgents to minimise their footprint ashore while still maintaining a strong presence in the operational theatre. This reduces the risk of alienating local populations, thus mitigating the prospective development of resentment towards ‘the involvement of outsiders in community problems’.

Moreover, using sea bases instead of terrestrial bases also reduces the risk of insurgent attack as sea bases ‘can be protected by the fleet, offering a multi-layered defensive system that is hard to find, hard to target, hard to attack and is virtually invulnerable to terrorist activity’. Likewise, the susceptibility of terrestrial bases to GPS-guided weapons is circumvented by the flexibility and manoeuvrability of sea bases. Sea-basing maintains power projection capabilities while minimising the immediate threats to bases, with the US predicting that ‘sea-basing will provide continual sustainment for up to two brigades during initial phases of an operation’, as well as continual follow-up support.

5. US Department of Defense, ‘Seabasing: Joint Integrating Concept’, 1 August 2005, p. 5.
6. James Kraska, *Maritime Power and the Law of the Sea: Expeditionary Operations in World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 208–09.
7. Ian Speller, *Understanding Naval Warfare* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 145–46.
8. Sam J Tangredi, ‘Sea-Basing – Concept, Issues, and Recommendations’, *Naval War College Review* (Vol. 64, No. 4, 2011), p. 35.
9. US Department of Defense, ‘Seabasing’, p. 33.
Furthermore, sea-basing gives maritime assets greater utility in COIN campaigns, as it is likely to minimise troop loss.10 The capability affords governments a politically expedient means of conducting COIN campaigns as its light footprint and the likelihood of fewer casualties can reduce domestic opposition to military intervention. In avoiding ‘Vietnam Syndrome’, James Kurth suggests that the ‘reaction of the … public against ground combat operations may strengthen the Navy’s case for naval [contributions]’. Therefore, sea-basing is not only useful in the theatre of operations – it is also beneficial on the counterinsurgent’s domestic front. Likewise, sea-basing provides advantages in relations with a host country. Should the need arise, it is costly to relocate or retreat from a terrestrial base, and, aside from logistical difficulties, withdrawal can undermine a counterinsurgent’s legitimacy. Comparatively, the discreet nature of offshore manoeuvres means that repositioning a sea base is far less damaging to a counterinsurgent’s reputation.

With these benefits in mind, sea-basing has further seen its utility rise as a result of the transition from manpower-intensive COIN to special forces-focused COIN. Since the beginning of the Global War on Terror, electorates and host-country governments have become increasingly opposed to the large-scale deployment of COIN forces. In response, and in accordance with the COIN principle of working ‘by, with and through’ allies and host countries, COIN operations have shifted to a model based on the deployment of small special forces units. This strategy was notably used by Task Force Dagger, whereby ‘SOF led and coordinated the indigenous anti-Taliban Northern Alliance fighters, which minimized the adverse political impact among Afghans from the presence of foreign troops’.12

Herein lies the importance of sea-basing within COIN campaigns. Operating under the ‘by, with and through’ doctrine, counterinsurgents have shunned high-visibility signals of intent in favour of less visibility and greater flexibility, both of which are provided by sea bases. For example, MV Ocean Trader functions as a mothership under the command of US Joint Special Operations Command, and enables special forces to loiter offshore and operate with extreme flexibility.13 Similarly, this thinking is echoed by the Royal Navy’s Littoral Strike Ship ambitions. By using these ships to support the Future Commando Force, Royal Marines will be held ‘at exceptionally high readiness, and able to respond at a moment’s notice bringing the fight from sea to land’.14

Counterinsurgents have shunned high-visibility signals of intent in favour of less visibility and greater flexibility

Provided that there is sufficient maritime access to allow for their formation, sea bases increase the security, flexibility and defensibility of counterinsurgent forces, while simultaneously balancing domestic and international pressures. Crucially, with the primacy of ‘by, with and through’ doctrine, the foundations have been laid for sea bases to supersede ground bases, as they are less visible and more flexible. Therefore, not only is sea-basing able to effectively contribute to COIN efforts, but the capability is growing in popularity as countries seek to develop littoral mothership capabilities.

Influencing Populations Through Maritime Presence

Maritime assets are also able to influence COIN campaigns by engaging with civilians and flying the ensign. Due to their flexibility, maritime assets form a central tenet of efforts to co-opt civilian populations. In this regard, there is a multiplicity of potential maritime contributions. During the Malayan Emergency, the Royal Navy visited areas

10. Andrew F Hayes and Teresa A Myers, ‘Testing the “Proximate Casualties Hypothesis”: Local Troop Loss, Attention to News, and Support for Military Intervention’, Mass Communication and Society (Vol. 12, No. 4, 2009), p. 379.
11. James Kurth, ‘The New Maritime Strategy: Confronting Peer Competitors, Rogue States, and Transnational Insurgents’, Orbis (Vol. 51, No. 4, 2007), p. 599.
12. Jonathan Stevenson, ‘“Special” Forces: A Corps Deployed Too Broadly’, National Interest (No. 86, November/December 2006), p. 73.
13. Andrew White, ‘Maritime FOBs for Seaborne SOF’, Asian Military Review (Vol. 28, No. 4, 2020), pp. 40–42.
14. Gavin Williamson, ‘Defence in Global Britain’, speech given at RUSI, London, 11 February 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/defence-in-global-britain>, accessed 5 December 2020.
affected by insurgent activity and also hosted various officials. Likewise, during the 1914 Durazzo insurgency, maritime assets conducted humanitarian relief efforts. Not only did they facilitate the establishment of a field hospital, but they also enabled the evacuation of non-combatants. Humanitarian contributions allow maritime assets to ‘establish the presence of the security forces in a routine and positive way’, helping counterinsurgents to co-opt local populations.

Moreover, the ability of maritime assets to fly the ensign and conduct presence patrols further enhances COIN efforts. These demonstrations not only reassure local populations and contested governments, but they further serve to intimidate insurgent forces. Therefore, maritime assets acting in this capacity are able to ‘exert considerable influence by loitering offshore, possibly over the horizon, to provide a strong presence without commitment’. In effect, as Commodore Simon Williams argued, maritime patrolling is ‘really no different than civil-military contacts in Baghdad or Ramadi’. Therefore, maritime assets are able to increase the scale of civil–military relationship building, while passively sending messages of support to populations and intimidating insurgents.

As such, the ability of maritime assets to engage with local populations and fly the ensign illustrates their non-kinetic contributions to COIN campaigns, especially when relationship building ashore is impacted by a reluctance for troop deployment. With their ability to co-opt local populations through humanitarian efforts, and to simultaneously secure populations and deter insurgents through their presence and patrols, maritime assets vastly expand counterinsurgents’ capabilities with regard to winning the support of local populations.

Naval Gunfire in Support of Counterinsurgency Operations

Despite the primacy of non-kinetic action, kinetic action is still a vital constituent of successful COIN campaigns. Therefore, the kinetic capabilities of maritime assets provide further tools for counterinsurgents to employ. A principal kinetic contribution is naval gunfire support (NGS), which enables maritime assets to act as large floating artillery pieces which can engage insurgents directly, while generating various psychological effects.

Much like field artillery, NGS engages with and destroys insurgents. However, NGS holds several benefits over conventional artillery. On certain terrain, maritime platforms are more flexible than cumbersome field-deployed artillery pieces. Therefore, maritime assets can conduct NGS even when the theatre prevents the use of conventional artillery. For example, during the Malayan Emergency, jungles proved ‘too dense for the deployment of artillery inland’. Instead, maritime assets provided heavy and sustained gunfire in support of ground forces. Likewise, during the 1878–82 Balkan insurgency, naval gunfire from Austro-Hungarian forces was used instead of artillery as it could ‘compensate when mountain batteries could not find suitable firing positions in the extremely rough, high-mountain terrain’. Moreover, naval action near Krivošije further demonstrated the versatility of naval gunfire, as it was able to engage a wider range of targets. Although conventional artillery was unable to impact fortified positions, gunfire from the Archduke Albrecht and the Nautilus was able to breech stone-walled fortifications. Consequently, NGS was able to support the infantry in situations where artillery could not.

15. Martin Murphy, ‘Naval Support’, in Thomas Rid and Thomas Keaney (eds), Understanding Counterinsurgency: Doctrine, Operations, and Challenges (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 122.
16. The National Archives (TNA), ADM 1/8386/210, ‘Affairs in Albania. Events in Durazzo. Proceedings of Fleets of European Powers in Interests of King of Albania Against Insurgents; Committee of Imperial Defence’, 1914.
17. Tim Benbow, ‘Maritime Forces and Counter-Insurgency’, Contemporary Security Policy (Vol. 28, No. 1, 2007), p. 85.
18. NATO, ‘Allied Joint Doctrine for Counter Insurgency (COIN)’, July 2016, p. 4-26.
19. Simon Williams, quoted in Murphy, ‘The Blue, Green, and Brown’, pp. 70–71.
20. NATO, ‘Allied Joint Doctrine for Counter Insurgency’, p. 4-26.
21. Steven Paget, “A Sledgehammer to Crack a Nut”? Naval Gunfire Support During the Malayan Emergency, Small Wars and Insurgencies (Vol. 28, No. 2, 2017), p. 367.
22. Ibid.
23. John Schindler, ‘Defeating Balkan Insurgency: The Austro-Hungarian Army in Bosnia-Hercegovina, 1878-82’, Journal of Strategic Studies (Vol. 27, No. 3, 2004), p. 546.
24. Ibid.
Furthermore, NGS can generate immense psychological effects. Writing about the use of artillery in trench warfare, General Richard Haking noted that 'by constantly harassing the enemy ... we can greatly improve the morale of our own troops and wear out and depress the enemy.' Haking's remarks are equally applicable to COIN campaigns, as naval gunfire is able to degrade an insurgent's morale while simultaneously improving that of a counterinsurgent. For example, during the Malayan Emergency, naval 'night bombardments had a particularly lowering effect on the morale of the [insurgents] because the constant harassment offered them no respite.' NGS also supports forces ashore, helping to 'reinforce the idea that those fighting on the ground' are not fighting alone. Correspondingly, fire support is an incredible demonstration of a counterinsurgent's strength and is thus able to 'persuade[6] many civilians to resist the terrorists and co-operate with the Security Forces'.

NGS can impact battlespaces from further away, and with greater flexibility, compared with aerial bombardment and artillery strikes. For example, loitering ships can conduct short-range fire support with guns, and long-range fire support with cruise missiles, such as Tomahawk land-attack missiles which can 'strike at ground targets hundreds of miles inland with pinpoint accuracy'. This removes the need for counterinsurgents to hold forward airbases and means that artillery units do not need to be deployed. Coupled with the primacy of the 'by, with and through' doctrine, NGS allows host countries and partners to call on fire support without counterinsurgents incurring strong political opposition from the deployment of troops. Moreover, the permanency of loitering maritime platforms means that NGS can rapidly engage time-sensitive targets without scrambling aircraft, repositioning drones or deploying artillery.

**Interdiction and SLOC in Maritime Counterinsurgency**

Insurgents have consistently used the maritime domain to supply their campaigns, meaning maritime assets are vital for combating insurgents’ sea lines of communications (SLOC). As insurgents require a form of sea control to facilitate maritime supply, ‘he who lives by sea control can die from sea denial.’ Therefore, interdiction and blockade are pivotal capabilities which are able to fundamentally impede insurgencies.

Maritime interdiction and blockade are able to create perennial supply shortages for insurgents, thus generating strategic and long-term effects. The capabilities and effectiveness of maritime interdiction were proven by the Sri Lankan Navy (SLN) during the Eelam War IV against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In order to supply their campaign, the LTTE founded the Sea Pigeons, cargo ships that loitered far offshore and ‘transferred[ed] their loads to high speed logistics craft’ which then brought the supplies ashore. Despite the LTTE’s initial successes, the SLN ultimately developed an effective interdiction strategy which destroyed the lifeblood of the LTTE. Zachary Griffiths highlights how the SLN’s ‘previous tactic of attempting to blockade all landing sites on Sri Lanka was a Sisyphean task’. However, the SLN’s destruction of the LTTE’s supply fleet prevented rearming and resupplying, thereby facilitating the Sri Lankan Army’s terrestrial offensives. The importance of the SLN’s interdiction campaign is highlighted by

25. Paget, “A Sledgehammer to Crack a Nut?”, pp. 369–71.
26. Richard Haking, quoted in Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare 1914–1918: The Live and Let Live System* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 91.
27. TNA, ADM 1/26140, ‘Reports by Flag Officer Malayan Area on Joint Operations Against Communist Terrorists in Malaya’, 1955.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 371.
29. Robert Jackson, *The Malayan Emergency and Indonesian Confrontation: The Commonwealth’s Wars 1948–1966* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2011), p. 78.
30. Royal Navy, ‘Astute Class’, <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/the-equipment/submarines/attack-submarines/astute-class>, accessed 5 December 2020.
31. Paul A Povlock, ‘The Coming Maritime Insurgent Century’, US Naval Institute, *Proceedings* (Vol. 138, No. 12, 2012), p. 32.
32. Murphy, ‘The Blue, Green, and Brown’, p. 72.
33. Zachary Griffiths, ‘Small Boats, Long Wars: The Impact of Maritime Operations on Insurgency Duration’, US Military Academy, working paper, 25 August 2017, p. 12.
34. *Ibid.*
the fact that in two years, the LTTE were deprived of over 10,000 tons of warfighting materiel.35

Maritime assets are vital for combating insurgent’s sea lines of communications

Moreover, aside from merely seizing warfighting materiel, the mere presence of riverine and littoral patrols can deter, illustrate host country support and ‘send a strong message ... that illegal activities will be targeted’.36 Although difficult to quantify, Operation Game Warden, conducted by the US and South Vietnamese navies between 1965 and 1973, illustrates these subsidiary benefits. During the operation, brown- and green-water interdiction patrols successfully disrupted Viet Cong organisation and activities. Viet Cong control over civilians was loosened as its tax collections were impeded, and its waterborne operations were also limited.37 Additionally, Operation Market Time (and its predecessor Task Force 115) saw the North Vietnamese abandon coastal supply routes after 1967 as, on average, a suspect vessel was boarded every 15–30 seconds.38 Aside from the tonnage interdicted, the tempo of vessel inspection had an immense psychological effect on insurgents and civilians, compounding the damage to insurgent SLOC. While the interdiction campaign deterred insurgents, it also reinforced the counterinsurgent’s omnipotence to the civilian population, akin to how traditional blue-water navies demonstrate their force through ‘forward presence’. Maritime assets engaged in interdiction operations are also able to ‘persuad[e] people that their best interests are served by COIN success’, and that the counterinsurgent ‘can protect them and that resisting it is pointless’.39

Maritime assets are further able to disrupt insurgents’ SLOC by conducting blockades. However, unlike interdiction, blockades affect a greater number of vessels. By forming a layered defensive blockade, maritime assets are more likely to intercept insurgent supply vessels. For example, during the COIN campaign against the Greek National Organization of Cypriot Fighters (EOKA), British ships were able to blockade Cyprus. This inhibited maritime supply routes and prevented the EOKA from using Rhodes as a rear area.40 Moreover, close-in blockade prevents insurgents from using key maritime infrastructure, and disrupts insurgents’ SLOC without the need for a costly layered defence. For example, Operation Pocket Monkey severely restricted North Vietnamese and Viet Cong logistics. The close-in blockade of Haiphong, achieved by deploying sea mines, reduced maritime imports by half.41

Maritime assets which conduct interdiction operations or enforce blockades are able to cripple insurgents which rely on SLOC. Although these tasks are laborious and resource intensive, when they are intelligence-led they prove to be cost effective. As such, disrupting enemies’ SLOC can prove invaluable as it can generate perennial supply shortages, deprive insurgents of key infrastructure and reinforce the omnipotence of counterinsurgent forces.42

Direct Maritime Action in Counterinsurgency Operations

Maritime assets can be used to engage waterborne insurgents with minimal risks to civilians, who are unlikely to be hurt during kinetic operations on water.43 Furthermore, using maritime assets to conduct direct action allows counterinsurgents to influence the battlespace.44 During the Angolan War of Independence, Portuguese riverine capabilities prevented insurgents from using waterways and sea approaches, and the Congo River patrols proved highly successful. In fact, maritime activity had,

35. Dhaneshi Yatawara, ‘Navy Bulwarks Thwart LTTE Assaults’, Sunday Observer, 16 May 2010, <http://archives.sundayobserver.lk/2010/05/16/victory15.asp>, accessed 5 December 2020; Justin O Smith, ‘Maritime Interdiction in Sri Lanka’s Counterinsurgency’, Small Wars and Insurgencies (Vol. 22, No. 3, 2011), pp. 454–56.
36. NATO, ‘Allied Joint Doctrine for Counter Insurgency (COIN)’, p. 4-25.
37. Murphy, ‘Naval Support’, p. 118.
38. Ibid., p. 117.
39. Ibid., p. 117.
40. Gordon Weiss, The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers (London: Vintage Books, 2012), p. 249.
41. Kurth, ‘The New Maritime Strategy’, pp. 592–93.
by 1966, caused insurgents to abandon the Congo River and move operations 620 miles eastward.\(^5\) In contrast, the Portuguese Army failed to deny insurgents use of the Ruvuma River in Mozambique as, without a presence on the water, it could not prevent the insurgents from ‘dispers[ing] into the difficult terrain with relative ease’.\(^6\) Accordingly, the Portuguese Army was unable to shape the battlespace.

There is a compelling need to preserve maritime COIN skills as strategic debates shift towards great power competition.

Equally, the SLN demonstrated how direct maritime action against seaborne insurgent forces is vitally important for defeating insurgencies that have a maritime dimension. The capabilities of maritime assets were exemplified by SLN vessels operating according to the Small Boat Concept.\(^7\) In effect, the SLN emulated the tactics of the Sea Tigers, the maritime wing of the LTTE. Coupled with the superior resources of the Sri Lankan state, the SLN was able to confront and destroy the maritime arm of the Tamil insurgency. For example, the use of inshore patrol craft (IPC) squadrons and the Rapid Action Boat Squadron (RABS) enabled the SLN to strategically station forces at key points.\(^8\) Hence, when Sea Tiger squadrons were deployed, SLN IPC squadrons were able to out-swarm them, often by a ratio of 2:1.\(^9\) Not only did this strategy inflict an unsustainable rate of attrition on the Sea Tigers, but it further allowed the SLN to better defend its traditional maritime platforms. Principally, Arrow-class boats were able to integrate with larger vessel formations ‘to address unconventional attacks from terrorist attacks at sea’.\(^10\)

The SLN’s Small Boat Concept illustrates the effectiveness of direct maritime action against seaborne insurgent forces. By adopting and adapting the Sea Tiger’s tactics, the SLN comprehensively defeated their offensive capabilities, thus undermining the maritime arm of the insurgency, and the wider insurgency itself.

Preserving Maritime Counterinsurgency Skills

There is a compelling need to preserve maritime COIN skills as strategic debates shift towards great power competition. Although low-intensity and great power threats are not dichotomous, changes in threat perceptions require naval planners to balance resources, structure forces and make strategic prioritisations. In part, this echoes Elmo Zumwalt’s ‘High–Low’ debate of the 1970s, where naval planners had to prioritise a few high-end platforms, or many low-end platforms.\(^11\) This prioritisation is integral to dictating the extent to which maritime assets may contribute to future low-intensity conflicts. In the face of potential great power conflict, with navies prioritising blue-water and carrier strike capabilities, a narrow focus on high-end platforms will undermine the ability of navies to effectively counter low-intensity threats. That is not to say that high-end platforms cannot combat low-intensity threats. On the contrary, their capabilities have been demonstrated in the aforementioned case studies. Instead, a strict focus on high-end ships strains naval budgets, and can limit the breadth at which naval forces operate. Therefore, navies must ensure that they do not develop tunnel vision with regards to great power conflict; rather, they must keep sub-state and low-intensity capabilities and knowledge in their peripheral vision.

However, this is a challenge, as making preparations for great power conflict requires a careful balancing of forces. This balancing is typified by the controversy surrounding the Royal Navy’s Type 45 programme. Of the 12 destroyers originally planned, only six were eventually commissioned, and debate raged regarding costs and platform numbers.\(^12\) It was argued that because the Type 45s were so expensive, the Royal Navy would not be able to build enough of them

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45. Murphy, ‘Naval Support’, p. 123.
46. Ibid.
47. Paul Povlock, ‘A Guerrilla War at Sea: The Sri Lankan Civil War’, Small Wars Journal (September 2011), pp. 31–32.
48. Ibid.
49. Yatawara, ‘Navy Bulwarks Thwart LTTE Assaults’.
50. Alex Carter and Damian Fernando, ‘The Rise of the Small Boats’, Daniel K Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, March 2018, p. 5.
51. James C Bradford, America, Sea Power, and the World (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), p. 307.
52. Tim Benbow, ‘The Future of Naval Conflict and Lessons from History’, in Joachim Krause and Sebastian Bruns (eds), Routledge Handbook of Naval Strategy and Security (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 33–34.
to carry out a wide range of operations. Latterly, this debate has been carried into the Royal Navy’s carrier strike era. For example, Frank Judd questions whether the Royal Navy would ‘become a bit tied and muscle-bound [by carrier strike obligations, without] the flexibility to respond elsewhere’.

It is feared that the number of vessels needed to support a carrier strike group will leave gaps elsewhere in the fleet, and impede flexibility and responsiveness. Hence, the potential for naval forces to contribute to future low-intensity conflicts is interlinked with the wider naval debate about quality and quantity. As suggested by the ‘Black Swan’ joint concept note, ‘large combatants will be too few, too costly, too mission essential and most importantly too vulnerable to be risked in a contested littoral’. Therefore, navies need to assess and determine their own individual priorities and decide which type of platforms will suit their strategic visions. Some countries may focus on constructing an all high navy in preparation for great power conflict; others, on an all low navy for lower-intensity and constabulary operations; and others still on a mixed high–low navy. Nonetheless, however navies choose to structure their forces, it is vital that a broad range of capabilities and knowledge is maintained to ensure that a full spectrum of operations can be covered.

**Conclusion**

In summary, maritime assets have contributed widely to both historical and contemporary COIN campaigns. Through both population- and enemy-centric capabilities – owing mainly to their flexibility, formidability, responsiveness, manoeuvrability and precision – maritime platforms are able to heavily influence COIN campaigns, low-intensity conflicts and sub-state challenges. Therefore, as the focus of naval and strategic debate has now shifted back to great power conflict, it is vital that naval contributions to these operations are not forgotten, given the historical prominence of low-intensity conflict during great power confrontations. Thus, maritime contributions to COIN campaigns must, at the very least, be kept in naval planners’ peripheral vision.

Andrew Thomas White is a recent graduate of King’s College London. Having studied in the department of War Studies, he developed a keen interest in seapower, and used his final-year dissertation to explore maritime counterinsurgency. This article reflects the views of the author, not those of any institution or organisation.

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53. Frank Judd, House of Lords, ‘HMS Queen Elizabeth’, debate, 4 November 2020, column 695.
54. Ministry of Defence, Joint Concept Note 1/12: Future “Black Swan” Class Sloop-of-War: A Group System, Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, 2012, p. 1-13.