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Britain's Hybrid Navy: Managing the Transition

Recent Ukrainian maritime drone operations against Russian vessels near Libya demonstrate the growing geographical reach of uncrewed warfare.[1] Meanwhile, the launch of Autonomous UK on 25 November has brought renewed attention to the industrial and regulatory constraints affecting Britain's adoption of autonomous systems.[2]

The National Audit Office's assessment of the Defence Investment Plan, published on the same day, identifies technological maturity and the potential extension of the Type 45 destroyers' service lives as uncertainties affecting future defence expenditure.[3] CISES considers that parliamentary scrutiny should examine the relationship between technological adoption, operational readiness and affordability throughout the Royal Navy's transition towards a hybrid fleet.

Suggested questions

1. What operational, industrial and regulatory milestones will inform the decision on extending the service lives of the Type 45 destroyers?
2. How will the Ministry of Defence account for the financial and readiness implications of delays to the Hybrid Navy programme?
3. How will the July 2027 Defence Investment Plan update demonstrate progress towards integrating uncrewed systems into British and allied naval capabilities?

1 Background

The Defence Investment Plan envisages replacing the Type 45 destroyers' maritime air defence capability with a combination of crewed Common Combat Vessels and uncrewed missile and sensor platforms. A decision on whether to extend the destroyers' service lives is expected in 2027–28.[4] The deployment of HMS Dragon to reinforce Cyprus's air defences in March 2026 illustrates the continuing importance of maintaining this capability throughout the transition.[5]

Britain's transition also has implications for its allies. The Northern Navies Initiative agreement, signed on 10 November, commits participating countries to developing interoperable maritime capabilities.[6] Previous CISES research identified interoperability as central to the initiative's contribution to regional deterrence.[7]

2 Policy considerations

Autonomous UK's proposals to accelerate procurement, testing and certification merit consideration alongside the requirements of military integration. CISES research into the US Navy's acquisition reforms highlights the importance of common technical standards, personnel training and human accountability in developing effective hybrid fleets.[8] Rapid procurement remains essential, but its operational value depends on how effectively new technologies are integrated into the wider force.

Whereas the Type 45 combines sensors, command systems and weapons on a single platform, its planned replacement distributes these functions across multiple vessels, increasing reliance on resilient communications and effective coordination.[9]

Delays in integrating these capabilities could require Britain to sustain existing and replacement systems concurrently, increasing financial pressures. Equally, extensive life extensions could constrain investment in emerging technologies. The National Audit Office's findings concerning incomplete longer-term cost forecasts and limited departmental delivery capacity reinforce the importance of assessing these risks before committing to force-structure decisions.[3]

3 Recommendations

CISES recommends that the Ministry of Defence:

- Establish capability-based criteria for the retirement of existing naval platforms, incorporating operational effectiveness, interoperability, regulatory assurance and sustainment requirements.
- Use its July 2027 parliamentary update to set out progress against these criteria and the financial implications of timely and delayed delivery of replacement capabilities.

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References

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