FOR CIVILISATION

878 Briefing

The Condition of the Royal Navy & the Threat to Britain

Briefing 2. The Royal Navy's "Frigate Gap" Crisis

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Introduction

British Governments all failed to build even one new frigate from 1999 to 2017. This has led to a so-called "frigate gap", which has been made worse by the slow construction of the Type 26 and Type 31 frigates which will replace the current Type 23. This frigate gap will last until the mid-2030s at the earliest.[1]

As a result, the hulls of the Royal Navy's current Type 23 frigates, designed for an 18-year life but extended to serve beyond 30 years, are reportedly now "rotting" and "cannot be kept seaworthy".[2]

The United Kingdom's slow vessel-building should be compared with the Japanese Self-Defence Force (JSDF), for which the first Mogami Class frigate was laid down in 2019: by 2027 Japan will have delivered and commissioned 12.

[1] Navy Lookout. (2025). '*The Royal Navy's frigate gap – how deep and how long will it last?*'. Available online at: https://www.navylookout.com/the-royal-navys-frigate-gap-how-deep-and-how-long-will-it-last/ Last accessed 24th August 2026.
[2] Ibid.

Meanwhile, HMS Sutherland was the final Type 23 frigate to complete its life-extension (LIFEX) modernisation and overhaul program, returning to sea trials in 2025, after four years. Due to the specific and unique steel specifications and construction choices used in the production of the Type 23s, further life extensions are now impossible. Under warship class certification rules, the Type 23 frigate's LIFEX upkeep programme is valid for a maximum of six years.[3] This means it is plausible that by 2031 there will be no serviceable Type 23s available.

The Deterioration of the Frigate Fleet

The state of the Royal Navy's operational fleet readiness is stark: at a push there have recently been merely two deployable destroyers, often only one. Even that is sometimes a stretch, as the world observed when the Royal Navy struggled to deploy HMS Dragon in the aftermath of the attack on RAF Akrotiri in March 2026.

Elsewhere, just one Type 23 frigate is at sea; by mid-September 2026 not a single *Astute*-class attack submarine had been at sea through the summer, with all five submarines alongside for maintenance, refits, or awaiting trials infrastructure.[4]

Britain's frigate and destroyer numbers – its principle war-fighting fleet – have fallen sharply, losing 75% of frigate and destroyer strength since 1989 what remains lacks readiness. Compounding this lack of sea-presence, aging platforms and limited availability increasingly constrain Britain's ability to deploy its Navy, and to deter its adversaries whilst still having to respond to multiple threats. This is particularly acute in the North Atlantic, the Mediterranean and the Middle East, as well as increasingly across the Indo-Pacific: these final two regions have a deployment structure that successive British governments have intended to be persistent in nature. Both are now in danger of being almost entirely operationally redundant due to a near collapse in availability in the fleet.

The drastic cuts to the British Armed Forces over the last two decades have been especially brutal to Royal Navy personnel and fleet numbers. The steady erosion of fleet vessels is stark.

[3] Thomas, R. (2023). *UK Type 23 frigates refit period length increasing*. Navy Technology. Available online at: naval-technology.com/news/uk-type-23-frigates-refit-period-length-increasing/ Last accessed 2nd November 2026.
[4] Navy Lookout. (2026). Royal Navy's newest attack submarine HMS Agamemnon leaves shipyard after 13 years under construction. Available online at: https://www.navylookout.com/royal-navys-newest-attack-submarine-hms-agamemnon-leaves-shipyard-after-13-years-under-construction/ Last accessed 2nd November 2026.

At the close of the Cold War in 1990, a time in which the Russian submarine threat to the North Atlantic had deep parallels with today, the Royal Navy maintained 35 frigates and 13 destroyers. By 2013 that had been reduced to 13 frigates and six destroyers.[5] Come 2026 the numbers are only six frigates and six operational destroyers; at the close of this year, the frigate number has dropped further to only five.[6]

Due to the age of many of these vessels, their frequent and extensive repairs, engine maintenance work, and refits in Portsmouth, in reality only around half of those numbers are actually available for operations at any time. By the close of 2024, only two destroyers were operationally deployable.[7] Two years on, that has on occasion been down to a single frigate.

The most recent cuts to the fleet were announced in the 2021 Defence Command Paper (DCP), with the two oldest Type 23 frigates being retired early.[8] This leaves five frigates with towed-array Sonar 2087 (a variable-depth, towed-array sonar system crucial for anti-submarine warfare (ASW)), against a requirement for eight. Industry experts have repeated their concerns that two more of the five remaining Type 23s are likely to be declared unseaworthy in 2027, leaving only three vessels.

At the end of 1945, the Royal Navy had over 800 frigates and destroyers. Given the era, such a comparison to today's fleet numbers would at first glance appear meaningless. But this hints at Britain's industrial capacity at the time: most of those vessels, including battleships like HMS *King George V*, aircraft carriers and cruisers, were built in major British yards, including at Belfast, Clydebank, Tyne and Birkenhead.[9] Given that the primary role of the Type 23 frigates is anti-submarine warfare (ASW), this is a perilously vulnerable capability gap, given the rapid escalation in Russian submarine activity around British waters.[10]

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[5] Army Technology. (2012). Defence cuts risk the UK's global military position. Available online at: https://www.army-technology.com/features/featurecomment-defence-cuts-risk-the-uks-global-military-position/ Last accessed 10th August 2026.
[6] Allison, G. (2026). *Britain now down to five operational frigates*. UK Defence Journal. Last accessed 2nd November 2026.
[7] Croft, E. (2024). Only two Royal Navy destroyers currently operational as size of fleet hits record low. The Daily Telegraph. Available online: at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2024/12/14/only-two-navy-destroyers-currently-operational/ Last accessed 10th August 2026.
[8] Defence in a Competitive Age. (2021). Available online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defence-in-a-competitive-age Last accessed 29th August 2026.
[9] Naval History. (2026). Royal Navy in 1939 and 1945. Available online at https://www.naval-history.net/WW2CampaignRoyalNavy.htm#:~:text=%2D%20Cruisers%20and%20(shortly)%20armed,break%20the%20Allied%20supply%20lines Last accessed 10th August 2026.
[10]Clark, R. (2026). The Condition of the Royal Navy & the Threat to Britain Briefing 1. The Submarine Fleet Available online at: 878institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/10/878-The-Condition-of-the-Royal-Navy-the-Threat-to-Britain-Briefing-1.-The-Submarine-Fleet.pdf Last accessed 2nd November 2026.

The Impending "Frigate Gap" Crisis

In February 2026, to much Government fanfare, HMS Active, the second of five new Type 31 frigates, emerged from the assembly hall at Rosyth shipyard. Seen by some as a glorified Corvette (a smaller ship designed for short-range operations), the Type 31 will be lightly armed for its size, mainly due to budget restrictions and to maintain the vessel as a "general purpose" frigate, as opposed to ASW.

The five replacement Type 31s, alongside the eight new Type 26s, will be operational "by the mid-2030s", according to the MoD.[11] The first Type 26 frigate, HMS Glasgow, is approaching sea trials towards the end of 2026. The first three of eight ships are intended to be delivered by 2030-31, and the remaining five through that decade.

Delivery schedules for the Type 26s have already slipped by at least 12 months. With all eight Type 26s due by the "mid 2030s", the six-year LIFEX programme for HMS Sutherland, completed in 2025, may have expired by 2032.

As roughly one Type 26 a year is expected to achieve Initial Operating Capability (IOC) between 2028-2035, this means that by 2031 there may be no seaworthy Type 23s, creating a wider "frigate gap" well into next decade. This gap in Type 26 frigates in particular may be worsened by the news that the BAE Systems yards in Glasgow have begun building some Type 26s for Norway, before completing the Royal Navy's eight-ship order of the same ships.[12]

Furthermore, the BAE Systems shipyard that manufactures these is operating at a capacity of one such vessel built every 12 months,[13] meaning all eight could be delivered by 2033-34: but that depends on ongoing investment to meet that rate, especially given current infrastructure shortages, industrial bottlenecks, and maintenance backlogs.

Similarly, it was hoped that the first Type 31 would be ready for 2027, but this has since slipped to 2030. Construction of HMS Active began in January 2023, taking three years. While the steady (if delayed) flow of new frigates is

[11] Royal Navy. (2026). Inspiration Class. Available online at: https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/equipment/ships/inspiration-class Last accessed 2nd November 2026.
[12] BBC News. (2026). Clyde shipyards to start Norway frigates before Navy order finished. Available online at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckgreze0yr6o Last accessed 2nd November 2026.
[13] Navy Lookout. (2026). Royal Navy Type 26 frigate secures record export success with Norway. Available online at https://www.navylookout.com/royal-navy-type-26-frigate-secures-record-export-success-with-norway/ Last accessed 12th August 2026.

welcome, there are concerns about timescales, fleet numbers, and fiscal uncertainty, which can all mean more delays, leading to greater capability gaps and vulnerabilities for the Royal Navy's short- to medium-term strategy.

Recommendations

1. Not one more Type 23 frigate should leave service until a Type 26 replaces it on a one-for-one basis.

2. Speed up the delivery of the Type 26 *and* Type 31 frigates. BAE Systems and Babcock have both presented costed options to the MoD to accelerate delivery, but these have been turned down by HM Government. These must urgently be readdressed.

3. Increase replacement frigate numbers, from a proposed eight Type 26 ASW to 12 vessels, and the five proposed general-purpose Type 31s, to at least ten. Ensure all are properly armed, not just "porcupines".

4. Ensure that the first eight Type 26 frigates are for the Royal Navy, with the remaining five to be delivered to Norway once these have been delivered, to replace the already aging and soon entirely unserviceable Type 23 fleet.