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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE / COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES
CSC 28 / CCEM 28

EXERCISE/EXERCICE NEW HORIZONS

A ROCK FOR ALL AGES

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Syndicate 11

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, Gibraltar has kept watch over the intersection of two continents and been the staging post for both migratory people and armies moving north or south between Africa and Europe. Overseeing the only entrance from the Atlantic into the Mediterranean it has continually acted as the guardian for both military and commercial shipping moving east or west through the Straits of Gibraltar. This essay first examines the historic, current then future strategic military significance of the United Kingdom's independent overseas territory of Gibraltar, to establish that Gibraltar is of continued military benefit to Britain and important to her future security. The conclusion drawn is that as a maritime nation, dependent on international trade in a fast changing world, it makes eminent sense for Britain to retain active control over Gibraltar and hence one of the world's major maritime chokepoints.

"Gibraltar is a place which Englishmen ought to know and revere. It affords at once a monument of her past deeds and a proof of her present power."¹

John, Earl of St Vincent

A natural geological fortress, the Rock of Gibraltar is five kilometres long and, on average, one kilometre wide. Rising vertically to 425 metres above sea level at the north end, it tapers to a cliffed plateau at the south². This small and seemingly insignificant six and a half square kilometre limestone promontory connected to the southern tip of the Iberian Peninsula³ stands at one of the world's strategic crossroads, the Straits of Gibraltar, known in ancient times as the Herculean Straits⁴. Throughout history, it has kept watch over the intersection of two continents and has been the staging post for both migratory people and armies moving north or south between Europe and Africa. As the only entrance from the Atlantic Ocean into the Mediterranean Sea⁵, it has also acted as the guardian for military and commercial shipping moving east or west through the Straits. Gibraltar's strategic position has empowered those in possession and been the root of many confrontations.

Two hundred and ninety eight years have passed since British Forces invaded, seized and claimed the 'Rock of Gibraltar'. It has

¹ E P Brenton, *Life and Correspondence of John, Earl of St. Vincent* (London: Colburn, 1838), 477.

² History Today Online Archive, "Gibraltar: The British Rock", 9 September 1980, <http://www.historytoday.com/index.cfm?articleid=17813> (29 November 2001).

³ CIA – The World Factbook 2001, "Gibraltar", n.d., <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/gi.html> (03 March 2002).

⁴ Its sheer, inaccessible cliffs have been identified as one of the "Pillars of Hercules" – marking the western classical world's furthest limits of navigation.

⁵ Sir William G F Jackson, *The Rock of the Gibraltarians* (Grendon, Northants: Gibraltar Books, 1990), 22.

remained in British hands ever since and today is one of the United Kingdom's thirteen remaining dependant territories. This impenetrable rock has consistently loomed large in the history books; it has been besieged fifteen times⁶, was Nelson's staging post for the Battle of Trafalgar, played decisive roles in Mediterranean strategy in both the First and Second World Wars and has protected the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) southern flank for the last fifty years. This essay will examine the historic, current and future strategic military significance of the United Kingdom's independent overseas territory of Gibraltar and establish that it is of continued military benefit to Britain and important to her future security.

To place Gibraltar's strategic military significance into context, it is necessary to first examine its varied and extensive history. Gibraltar has long been a dramatic landmark; its physical shape and geographical location have always governed its history⁷. In AD 711, the Moors⁸ invaded Spain through Gibraltar, then named Djebel-Tarik⁹ after the Moslem leader Tarik-ibn-Zeyad, overrunning Spain and advancing into central France before they were eventually halted. The Moorish occupation of Spain lasted 800 years, until the

⁶ BBC News, "Gibraltar: Rock of ages," 5 June 1999, http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/europe/newsid_278000/278251.stm (05 March 2002).

⁷ Tommy Finlayson, "Gibraltar – A Brief History", n.d., <http://www.frontier.gibnet.gi/history.html> (05 March 2002).

⁸ "A member of a Muslim people of mixed Berber and Arab descent, inhabiting NW Africa". *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: University Press, 1992).

⁹ The name 'Gibraltar' is a corruption of the Arabic words "Jebel Tarik" (Tarik's mountain).

'Reconquista'¹⁰ pushed the Moors back¹¹ and captured Gibraltar in 1462. The Moslem armies were then finally defeated in Granada and expelled from Europe in 1492¹². Gibraltar remained under Spanish rule from 1462 until 1704, during which it was further fortified and developed as a naval base from which Spanish forces sallied forth. It proved to be of strategical importance to the Spanish, first in countering Mediterranean and Barbary piracy and then in conquering the new world and strengthening their hold on European possessions. During the War of the Spanish Succession, however, an Anglo-Dutch force under the command of the British Admiral Sir George Rooke¹³ captured Gibraltar on 21 July 1704, in the name of the Archduke Charles of Austria, pretender to the throne of Spain¹⁴. Spain formally ceded Gibraltar 'in perpetuity' to Britain 'to be held and enjoyed absolutely with all manner of right forever', under Article X of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713¹⁵. It has remained in British hands ever since¹⁶.

¹⁰ The Spanish Reconquista was the most successful example of European Middle Ages expansionism. A Christian land rush into Iberia emerged in the 1240s - 1260s, that provided the demographic backbone for the expanding Christian states into the fourteenth century. It resulted in Christian European forces eventually taking the whole peninsula, permanently.

¹¹ Jackson, 29.

¹² Howard S Levie, *The Status of Gibraltar*, (Colorado: Westview, 1983), 5.

¹³ Levie, 9.

¹⁴ The contention for the Spanish throne between the Archduke Charles of Austria and Phillip, Duke of Anjou, grandson of Louis XIV of France, resulted in the War of the Spanish succession. Britain and the Netherlands sided with Austria.

¹⁵ The Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Great Britain and Spain signed at Utrecht, 2/13 July 1713: extracts from Article X (translated from the Latin). Jackson, Appendix B 333.

¹⁶ The treaty of Utrecht clearly recognises British sovereignty of Gibraltar but, crucially, gives Spain the right of first refusal should Britain renounce that sovereignty. This article, 289 years on, stands as the base document for all discussions on the sovereignty of Gibraltar and forms the basis of Spain's claim to decolonise Gibraltar and re-incorporate it into Spain. It is worth noting that Spain's control of Gibraltar from 1462 until 1713 represents the only period of Spanish rule; paradoxically, Spain's sovereignty of Gibraltar represents well over a hundred years less than Britain's.

In 1727, the Spanish, claiming that Britain's affairs in Gibraltar were in breach of the Treaty of Utrecht, unsuccessfully laid siege to the Rock. Then again in 1779, the French and Spanish combined forces and launched the 'Great Siege'.¹⁷ This four-year battle witnessed the small garrison of British troops on the Rock hold out against a numerically superior French and Spanish force¹⁸. The end of the Great Siege was marked by the Treaty of Versailles, signed in September 1783; although this was "the last time that Gibraltar faced a direct military assault, the Rock was by no means finished with war."¹⁹ The Great Siege caused the British public's fondness for the Rock to intensify as it represented British steadfastness at a time when the war in America²⁰ was proving the contrary. In short, it became a symbol of British strength and fortitude.

As Europe became engulfed in the Napoleonic Wars, Gibraltar developed as an important entry point both for naval operations into the Mediterranean and as the shortest and most economic trading route to India from Britain²¹. Admiral Nelson, in the months prior to the Battle of Trafalgar, made Gibraltar his military operations base, and after the battle his body was brought to Gibraltar aboard the

¹⁷ The Great Siege lasted from 1779 to 1783.

¹⁸ This period is discussed in detail in T H McGuffie's, *The Siege of Gibraltar* (London: B T Batsford, 1965).

¹⁹ Maurice Harvey, *Gibraltar*, (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1996), 103.

²⁰ The American war for Independence 1775 – 1783. Greater detail on this revolutionary war between Britain and America can be found at: The History Place, "American Revolution," 1998, <http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/revolution/index.html> (29 April 2002).

²¹ The main route was through the Mediterranean to Egypt, by caravan across Suez and then by ship through the Red Sea and on to India.

dismasted HMS VICTORY²². Ironically, at the time, Napoleon Bonaparte is quoted as declaring, "Gibraltar is of no value to Britain. It defends nothing; it intercepts nothing. It is simply an object of national pride that costs the English a good deal and wounds deeply the Spanish nation"²³. Whilst correct about the wound to Spain, Napoleon underestimated Gibraltar's military value, as he discovered to his detriment in Egypt in 1800²⁴. This victory transformed Gibraltar into a powerful symbol of British naval and military prowess, demonstrating that its geographical position at the mouth of the Mediterranean affords it a unique strategic advantage. Indeed, it was through Gibraltar that the majority of Britain's assistance to Spain was provided during her struggle with Napoleon²⁵.

At the end of the nineteenth century it was predicted that Gibraltar's days as a strategic fortress and naval base were numbered. Advances in weapons technology had created long-range guns capable of firing heavy high-explosive shells, which, if sited in concealed positions in the Spanish hinterland, could be brought to bear on the Rock. In addition, new naval torpedoes would make it unsafe for vessels to anchor in the Bay. Paradoxically, Gibraltar's military usefulness did not decline, but instead grew to be a more valuable military asset to Britain. The early part of the twentieth

²² Harvey, 104 – 109.

²³ 'Life on the Rock', *The Economist*, 4 February 1989.

²⁴ In th

century brought about the development of Gibraltar's naval dockyard and, when the First World War broke out in 1914, it provided base facilities for allied warships commanding the Straits. Furthermore, when Germany began its campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917, Gibraltar became a convoy assembly point²⁶. In addition, the new dry docks proved their worth for the repair of warships and merchant vessels damaged within towing range of Gibraltar²⁷.

One cannot overstate Gibraltar's strategic importance during the Second World War. It contained the only dock capable of accommodating a capital ship²⁸ between the United Kingdom (UK) and Durban; was the guardian of the western entrance to the Mediterranean, which Germany and Italy sought to close; and was the base from which the Royal Navy could control that part of the Mediterranean without French help²⁹. Hitler recognised the military importance of Gibraltar and stated in February 1945 "we ought to have attacked Gibraltar in the summer of 1940."³⁰ Hitler's 'Führer Directive Number 18' for Operation FELIX³¹ was a plan to seize Gibraltar and close the Mediterranean to the British. Had Franco³²

²⁶ The success of the U Boats stimulated the introduction of the convoy system that was introduced through a trial homeward run from Gibraltar in May 1917. Harvey, 133.

²⁷ Jackson, 264.

²⁸ A capital warship in modern times is defined as a battleship or a heavy cruiser that was usually steam driven and heavily armoured with armament of large calibre guns deployed in turrets.

²⁹ Jackson, 276.

³⁰ Joe Garcia, *Operation Felix* (Gibraltar: Medsun, 1979), 35.

³¹ The relevant section of Hitler's Directive No. 18, Documents on German Foreign Policy, Series D, Vol. XI, Item 323 reads as follows: "The aim of German intervention in the Iberian Peninsula (code name FELIX) will be to drive the English out of the Western Mediterranean. For this purpose Gibraltar should be taken and the Straits closed."

<http://www.gibnet.com/texts/hitler.htm> (05 March 2002).

³² The dictatorial leader of Spain from 1939 – 1975.

not declined to ally himself with Nazi Germany, the operation would certainly have been prosecuted. Speaking in Nuremberg after the War, Hermann Goering is reported to have said "Germany should have resolved immediately after the fall of France to march through Spain, with or without Franco's assent, capture Gibraltar and spill into Africa."³³ Moreover, the importance of the Rock was not lost on the British either. Winston Churchill communicated to President Roosevelt that "the value of Gibraltar's harbour and base to us is so great that no attempts should be made upon the Atlantic islands³⁴ until either the peninsula [Iberian] is invaded or the Spaniards give passage to the Germans."³⁵

Gibraltar played many crucial roles throughout the war. It was home to Admiral Sir James Somerville's battle fleet, Force H, which dominated the western Mediterranean between 1940 and 1943. It became Eisenhower's headquarters for Operation TORCH - the invasion of North Africa - in November 1942³⁶. Eisenhower was unequivocal about Gibraltar's value when he said, "Gibraltar made possible the invasion of Northwest Africa. Without it the vital air cover would not have been quickly established on the North African fields."³⁷ In addition, Gibraltar was an essential communications link and listening post throughout the war. In sum, the Rock was an

³³ Garcia, 35.

³⁴ Churchill was referring to the Atlantic Islands of the Azores, the Canary Islands and Madeira.

³⁵ Sir Winston Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume 3, The Grand Alliance* (London: Cassell & Co, 1950), 578.

³⁶ Jackson, 276.

³⁷ General D D Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (London: Heinemann, 1948), 106.

invaluable asset and allowed the Allies to hold a vital piece of territory in a hostile, German - influenced area of operations.

Although the history of Gibraltar after 1945 has been overshadowed by confrontation with Spain, principally on the issue of sovereignty³⁸, significant changes in the strategic importance of the Rock as a military base have also been witnessed. As relations began to deteriorate between the Soviet Union and the newly formed NATO in the 1950s, its significance as the bastion of the Organisation's southern flank quickly became evident. With the Soviets maintaining a formidable deep-water fleet in the Black Sea, whose only access to the Atlantic was via the Straits of Gibraltar, this southern flank was regarded as one of the areas most vulnerable to Soviet aggression³⁹. Similarly, all seaborne reinforcements and supplies required by NATO forces in the Mediterranean had to pass through the Straits of Gibraltar. Although the greater reach of warships and merchantmen reduced the need for staging posts, the logistical advantage of keeping such war stocks as weapons and fuel close to a potential source of conflict was indisputable. In addition, the tunnelling inside the Rock was further expanded⁴⁰ to provide greater storage and additional operational facilities. Gibraltar's role in

³⁸ The issue of Gibraltar's sovereignty is outside the scope of this essay but in sum, British control of Gibraltar has consistently been a stumbling block in relations between Spain and Britain. Successive Spanish Governments have continually demanded the reintegration of Gibraltar into Spain, despite the legal status of the colony and Spain's clear Treaty obligations. Britain has consistently stated that nothing can be resolved without the support of the people of Gibraltar who consider themselves to be British.

³⁹ Harvey, 157.

⁴⁰ Tunnelling for military purposes had a long tradition on the Rock and during the Second World War extensive tunnelling was undertaken. An underground city with its own electrical supply, accommodation, offices, hospitals, telephone exchanges and vast storage areas were all developed. In all there are 54 kilometres of tunnels inside the Rock.

holding open the Straits for allied shipping and, if necessary, closing it to Warsaw Pact vessels formed a crucial element in Britain's contribution to western defence⁴¹ during the Cold War.

Despite its strategic importance, in real terms, Britain has reduced and concentrated its military presence in Gibraltar over the last forty years. Between 1961 and 1991, the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) reduced its ownership of land area from sixty percent to twenty eight percent⁴² and accounted for only ten per cent of Gibraltar's GDP in 1994 compared to seventy five per cent in the late seventies⁴³. This trend has continued, with the MOD's contribution to the Rock's economy reducing further from £59 million in 1997 to £45 million at the turn of this century⁴⁴. In imperial terms although Gibraltar became less important to Britain, it proved a crucial back-up base, not least as a repository for conventional weapons during Britain's recovery of its dependant territory of the Falklands Islands in 1982.

On the fifth of June 1982 Spain joined NATO and the country became military allies with Great Britain for the first time since the British helped to drive Napoleon's troops from Spanish soil 170

⁴¹ Jackson, 296.

⁴² Parliamentary question by David Young MP (Bolton, South-East), 15 July 1991, 200. <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/cgi-bin/empower> (20 November 2001).

⁴³ Speech by Baroness Hooper to the House of Lords, 9 February 1994. <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/cgi-bin/empower> (20 November 2001).

⁴⁴ "Gibraltar's declining military position," *The Financial Times*, 14 May 2000.

years before⁴⁵. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, so fell the might of the Soviet Union. In consequence, NATO was given a new mission with an expanded portfolio⁴⁶ still centred however, on the collective defence of Europe. As a NATO member, it might appear appropriate and logical for control of the Straits to fall to the Spanish as the "guardian of NATO's southern flank and overlord of the seaways between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean."⁴⁷ Thus, with Spain hopefully capable of defending the Organisation's southern flank, there is a strong argument that Britain's military role in Gibraltar is over. Indeed, the UK force reductions that have occurred in Gibraltar in the 1990s support this view; the resident infantry battalion was withdrawn in 1991, and the Commander British Forces reduced in rank from Major General to Brigadier. Moreover, the Governor is now a civilian and not a British serviceman as was traditional. Although, there is clearly no requirement for strong defence of the Rock at present, it could be argued that the reductions on the Rock are commensurate with the overall reduction of British Forces since the end of the Cold War. There is still, however, a British military presence on the Rock that maintains an infrastructure that could be easily and quickly expanded should the need ever arise. Spain, as a NATO ally, poses no military

⁴⁵ Peter Gold, "A Stone in Spain's Shoe – The search for a solution to the problem of Gibraltar," (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994), 57.

⁴⁶ NATO's challenges for the future are fourfold. Firstly, the security and independence of its members. Secondly, the extension of security further afield to partner countries throughout Europe. Thirdly, to be ready to back the efforts of the international community to prevent conflict and crisis, and finally create a fairer balance in the transatlantic partnership. NATO Handbook, *Foreword by Secretary General*. (Brussels: NATO office of Information and Press, 2001), 11.

⁴⁷ Morris and Haigh, "Britain, Spain and Gibraltar 1945 – 90," (London: Routledge, 1992), 81.

threat and there is no current evidence to suggest that Morocco and Algeria, the closest nations in North Africa, are likely to become belligerent. Viewed in this context, and with a political imperative to cut defence spending, the troop reductions in Gibraltar are entirely justified.

History has demonstrated that in strategic terms Gibraltar has consistently been a pivotal influence in European and Mediterranean military campaigns. Consequently, whoever controls Gibraltar will always play a crucial role in the defence of the region. This therefore begs the question of whether Spain could successfully undertake a military operation to protect NATO's southern flank should the need arise. In order to provide military operational capability at the strategic level, a country must possess the two fundamental factors of military force and logistical bases⁴⁸. Spain certainly has a large number of military bases in the south, but her ability to provide a force capable of defending NATO's southern flank is questionable. In 1989, Rear Admiral Alba, an influential member of the Spanish Defence Ministry's Institute of Strategic Studies wrote that "Spain's current capability would be insufficient to control this area ... the forces are quantitatively insufficient to provide an adequate strategic operational capability."⁴⁹ Although, the Spanish Army underwent an historic top to bottom restructuring

⁴⁸ Rear Admiral Alba, "Can Spain defend the western Mediterranean?" *International Defence Review* 9/1989, 1165.

⁴⁹ Alba, *International Defence Review*, 1165.

plan during the 1990s called 'Plan Norte'⁵⁰, the notable shortcoming was that it only had single service reach; the Navy and Air Force are still some way behind. Indeed, this lack of an all-service joint strategic reform plan has made Spain's participation in NATO unclear⁵¹. In terms of a maritime force, the Spanish Navy has reduced its numbers by nearly sixty percent to 22,800 since 1989 and has reduced its fleet by over half to eighty-seven platforms and failed to replace its fleet of five destroyers⁵². If Admiral Alba was correct back in 1989, then it is likely that this smaller and yet to be fully modernised Navy remains incapable of defending NATO's southern flank today.

Another issue that must be raised concerns the geopolitical focus of Spain's foreign policies and her subsequent defence strategy, and hence her commitment to NATO and European defence. Some have suggested that the "long-term objective of Spanish strategic concern is Maghrib"⁵³ or possibly the Americas. Although the Government appears totally committed to both NATO and the European Union (EU), there is a belief that a bilateral relationship with the United States is all that really counts. Such rumours promote some measure of geopolitical autonomy from Europe, maintain important historical ties with the Americas and mask the Spanish preoccupation with North

⁵⁰ NORTE is an acronym that translates as New Organisation for the Ground Army.

⁵¹ Geoffrey Demarest, "Spain's Military-Strategic Outlook," *Parameters, US Army War College Quarterly – Winter 1996-97*, 26 – 38 <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/96winter/demarest.htm> (05 March 2002).

⁵² Jane's Fighting Ships, Spain (London: Jane's Information Group, 1989 & 2001), 478-478 & 635-636.

⁵³ Demarest, 26 – 38.

Africa⁵⁴. It is the increasing migration pressures on Spain from North Africa, a consequence of Europe's free trade, that are of considerable concern to Spain. For not only does Spain provide a bridge between the populations of Europe and Africa but also between Western and Arab cultures. The clash of civilisations warned of by Samuel Huntington⁵⁵ is a very real issue within the Iberian Peninsula; Spain follows a strong catholic philosophy and the assimilation of Arab cultures from the south presents an extremely difficult challenge for Spain⁵⁶. Of all the unstable countries in the Arab world, Algeria, Spain's nearest African neighbour, is probably the most volatile. It is therefore understandable that Spain's focus is not centred on European defence and the interests of NATO.

In addition, the current discussion between Spain and the UK over the sovereignty of Gibraltar⁵⁷ has further repercussions in the immediate area, with Morocco pressing its long-standing claim to the two little Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in North Africa⁵⁸. Although these two bases are of little strategic importance, they have been European territories for over 500 years and Madrid insists that they will forever remain so. Spain hence views the Moroccan

⁵⁴ Demarest, 26 – 38.

⁵⁵ Samuel P Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order," (New York: Touchstone, 1996), "The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural", 22.

⁵⁶ Demarest, 26 – 38.

⁵⁷ Both Governments have stated that their common aim is to reach a comprehensive agreement before the summer of 2002 covering all outstanding issues, including cooperation and sovereignty. Foreign & Commonwealth Office News, "Joint UK/Spain Communiqué on Gibraltar," 4 February 2002, <http://www.fc.gov.uk/news/newstext.asp?5862> (28 February 2002).

⁵⁸ "Gibraltar in reverse?; Spain's North African enclaves," *The Economist*, 23 February 2002.

claims and the emerging Islamic extremism threat in North Africa as a very real danger to the Spanish homeland. Spain has joined Euroforce, an organisation formed in conjunction with France, Italy and Portugal with a focus on Mediterranean security and stability. However, Spain has had a difficult time "steering the security attentions of its European (NATO) partners towards the south."⁵⁹ North European disinterest, apart from the UK, in the Mediterranean therefore tends to isolate Spain from the rest of Europe and helps feed Spanish interest in maintaining its independent long running bilateral relations with the United States.

Whether Spain's strategy is to look east or west in the future, her true allegiance is still a slightly difficult question for Britain to find an answer to. Despite being a member of both the EU and NATO, Britain could not count on Spain's support over the issue of the Falklands conflict in 1982. Spain's far right were vociferous in support of Argentina's direct use of force as a means of resolving a long-standing political problem and reiterated Spain's historic cultural affinity with the South Americans. Even the Spanish moderates expressed satisfaction at Argentina's objectives in the South Atlantic. Therein, Spain has displayed herself to be an "unreliable ally who might reject the use of force in dealing with territorial disputes."⁶⁰ When considering the above arguments concerning the geopolitical focus of Spain and hence her strategic

⁵⁹ Demarest, 26 – 38.

⁶⁰ Peter Gold, 208.

military outlook, it is difficult to see how Britain can afford to give up Gibraltar. In so doing Britain might be surrendering the collective defence of Europe's southern flank, to a country who is not completely sure of its own strategic foreign and military policy.

The political and international climate can change very rapidly - the events of 11 September 2001 aptly demonstrated this point - yet military capacity, especially in these days of sophisticated and expensive technology, is generally very slow to respond. Britain is the world's sixth largest trading nation⁶¹ and although no longer an empire, she does still possess thirteen independent territories. She actively pursues a far-reaching and comprehensive foreign policy and with one of the worlds' more formidable armed forces, she has maintained her role as an influential force in military disputes throughout the world. As such, the military base at Gibraltar is considered a key strategic outpost for UK forces in the Mediterranean and as a staging post for operations further afield. It provides five core functions: berthing facilities, notably nuclear; intelligence gathering facilities; access to an operational airfield; a base for the Royal Gibraltar Regiment; and an operational headquarters with the associated command and control facilities.⁶²

Despite its closure in 1985, the Gibraltar naval dockyard is today a viable commercial enterprise that has retained the majority

⁶¹ Royal Navy, "Facts and Figures," n.d., <http://www.royal-navy.mod.uk/rn/content.php3?page=207> (05 March 2002).

⁶² "Gibraltar, the United Kingdom and Spain". *House of Commons Research Paper 98/50*, 22 April 98, p20.

of its berthing and support facilities as well as the three dry docks. The docks are large enough to accommodate both current and planned future UK frigates or destroyers. Of significance, they are able to provide berthing and support facilities for nuclear vessels, predominantly British submarines, but can also accept and support foreign nuclear surface and subsurface vessels when required. Interestingly, due to her national policy, Spain does not allow nuclear vessels to dock at its ports.

The base has an advanced intelligence-gathering network. Its radars and antennas enable it to act as an electronic observation and listening post. Gibraltar's powerful radars could expect to detect an airborne raid more than 300 kilometres out over the Atlantic and more than 600 kilometres out over the Mediterranean⁶³. The sophisticated communications and signal intelligence (SIGINT) link to Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in England provides the UK with a flexible asset beyond its own geographical boundaries. As a terminal for one of the worldwide 'SOSUS'⁶⁴ chains of seabed sensors, originally laid to detect Soviet nuclear submarines during the Cold war, it is still able to track belligerent submarines from any nation.

⁶³ Vicente Blay Biosca, "Defending the Strait of Gibraltar – Spain's role is vital," *International Defence Review* 9, 1985, 1399.

⁶⁴ The **SO**und **SUR**veillance System is a fixed component of the US Navy's integrated undersea surveillance system, consisting of bottom mounted hydrophone arrays connected by undersea cables facilities on shore. Federation of American Scientists, "Intelligence Resource Programme – Sound Surveillance System," 27 April 1999, <http://www.fas.org/irp/program/collect/sosus.htm> (17 April 2002).

The airfield's runway, owned by the MOD, is capable of operating and supporting any of today's transport aircraft and helicopters, as well as the most modern vertical and short take off and landing (VSTOL) fighters. Thus, it is a viable staging post of strategic value to both the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force. The Royal Gibraltar Regiment⁶⁵ consists of three Infantry Rifle Companies and one Headquarters Company. It is responsible for the full time security of the colony and maintains the infrastructure to support short notice reinforcement from the UK if required.

As a command and control platform, although largely mothballed, Gibraltar is suitably equipped and could easily be reactivated in times of conflict or tension. As well as a ready made headquarters within the Rock's many kilometres of tunnels and caves, there is an arsenal, fuel tanks and logistic stores, allowing the re-supply of forces operating in the Mediterranean or Middle East. There is also a hospital hidden deep inside which could be activated in war. With these five core capabilities Gibraltar offers the UK a strategic military base in support of her world role. Indeed, it is "a brave, and perhaps foolish person, who would confidently predict that Gibraltar will never again have a military role."⁶⁶ It is therefore believed prudent that for as long as Britain has a say in the running

⁶⁵ This Regiment was formed in 1939, reorganised in 1948 as part-time reserves and then reorganised again in 1991 as a regular regiment in the British Army, when MOD reduced its military numbers in the Colony. Land Forces of Britain, "Gibraltar," 23 January 1996, <http://www.regiments.org/milhist/europe/gibralta.htm> (3 May 2002).

⁶⁶ Harvey, 158.

of Gibraltar, it should maintain its core military capabilities as a minimum.

The military strategic value of Gibraltar to Britain extends further than its NATO function, and has been invaluable in the recent past when Britain has had to operate outside of NATO. Between 1985 and 1987, Gibraltar monitored Libyan arms shipments to the IRA. Also, as the only useable diversion airfield in the area, it is probable that the American F111 air strike flown from Britain against Libya in 1986 was vectored via the Gibraltar air navigation centre⁶⁷. Thus, should Britain ever relinquish sovereignty of Gibraltar, a proven resource would be lost, immediately restricting the scope and freedom of British operations within the Mediterranean region and further afield. In light of the Gulf War, which saw Britain play a major role in Operation DESERT STORM, and the present global war on terrorism, with its varying degrees of international support, the loss of such a military outpost would significantly reduce Britain's reactivity and hence entail the acceptance of considerable risk.

In 1998, the UK conducted a Strategic Defence Review (SDR) with the purpose of ensuring that Britain's Armed Forces were shaped to meet the demands of the twenty first century. During the Cold War, a fundamental strategic assumption was that the enemy would come to Britain and consequently she invested in a nuclear deterrent to help

⁶⁷ John Keegan, "Running Down the Guardians of the Rock", *The Daily Telegraph*, 31 January 1989.

counter the threat. This is no longer the case, and in today's uncertain world, crises and threats to British interests can occur anywhere. The SDR thus called for versatile and readily deployable forces that can respond quickly; British Forces can now expect to have to go to the operation. Emphasis was placed, amongst other things, on power projection and expeditionary forces with greater strategic mobility⁶⁸. Naval and air bases such as Gibraltar and the UK Sovereign Base Areas in Cyprus provide flexible nodes from which to project power. The SDR also stated that Britain's place in the world is determined by its interests as both a nation and as a leading member of the international community⁶⁹. Similarly, its economic interests and history give it extensive international responsibilities; these include some ten million UK citizens who live and work abroad, as well as the thirteen dependent territories that depend upon the UK's support and protection⁷⁰. Again, Gibraltar provides an important staging post to support this worldwide policy.

The Review highlighted the fact that the UK's economy is founded on international trade and that the UK invests more of its income abroad than any other major economy. The UK also depends on foreign countries for the supply of raw materials and, above all, oil.⁷¹ With ninety per cent by weight and seventy six per cent by value of

⁶⁸ UK Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Defence Review-The future shape of our Forces*, July 1998, 21 – 30.

⁶⁹ MOD, *SDR*, para 17, 7.

⁷⁰ MOD, *SDR*, para 20, 7.

⁷¹ MOD, *SDR*, para 19, 7.

the country's trade being transported by sea⁷², the UK requires a strong global maritime presence to guarantee the free passage of her vessels. With over seventy thousand ships passing through the Straits of Gibraltar annually, of which forty five percent carry oil⁷³, the Straits are one of the world's strategic maritime choke points. Thus, when hostile regimes such as Iraq demonstrate their ability to threaten not only their neighbours, but also vital economic interests and even international stability⁷⁴, the importance of maintaining control of the Straits through continued ownership of the dependent territory of Gibraltar is vital to the economic stability of the UK.

The Review recognised that instability anywhere in the world can threaten the UK's security if not directly, then indirectly and that "outside Europe our interests are most likely to be affected by events in the Gulf and the Mediterranean."⁷⁵ Although the risk from North Africa is not at this time as high as that from the Middle East, the review warns that with its generic instability and the continual threat of escalating conflict, Britain must retain a continuing stake in its stability, especially in light of its proximity to NATO's and the EU's southern border. As expressed by Lord Thomas of Swynnerton in a debate on Gibraltar at the House of

⁷² Royal Navy, "Facts and Figures," n.d., <http://www.royal-navy.mod.uk/static/pages/207.html> (04 May 2002).

⁷³ Admiral Fernando Vidal, "Naval Defence of the Spanish area of strategic interest", *NATO's Sixteen Nations*, September 1989, 77.

⁷⁴ MOD, *SDR*, para 8, 5.

⁷⁵ MOD, *SDR*, para 40, 11.

Lords in 2001, "Who knows what the future of North Africa is?"⁷⁶ The Maghrib states of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco form a region of strategic significance in the Mediterranean and have always played a role within Mediterranean politics. Not surprisingly, it has traditionally been a battleground of competing ideologies specifically: Islam and Christianity⁷⁷. The allegiances of these Maghrib states are not self evident, nor do they appear permanent. All of these countries, bar Libya, are currently involved in NATO's 'Mediterranean Dialogue', which attempts to foster good relations and better mutual understanding throughout the Mediterranean as well as promote security and stability⁷⁸. It is early days though for this dialogue and countries such as Libya and Algeria remain volatile and unpredictable. Despite NATO's present focus to the east⁷⁹, it would be dangerous to ignore the potential threat from Islamic fundamentalism and maverick leaders like Libya's Colonel Gaddafi. North Africa, therefore, remains an unstable region that presents a significant security risk to both Britain and the European Community as a whole in the future. "Risks in these areas [North Africa and the Mediterranean] are likely to grow rather than decline,"⁸⁰ and so, whilst Britain might wish to put the military base in Gibraltar into a state of care and preservation, it will continue to act as a pivotal staging and watching post for events that occur to its south.

⁷⁶ House of Lords, "Hansard text – Gibraltar", 12 December 2001, <http://www.parliament.the-stationary-office.co.uk/pa/ld199900/ldhansrd/pdvn/lds01/text/11212-> (28 February 2002).

⁷⁷ George Joffe, "Strategic Significance of the Maghrib," *Navy International*, July 1981, 388.

⁷⁸ NATO Handbook, "The Alliance's Mediterranean Dialogue," (Brussels: NATO office of Information and Press, 2001), 91.

⁷⁹ The Balkans Conflict and now Afghanistan have been the focus of NATO's attention in recent years.

⁸⁰ UK Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Defence Review-Supporting Essay Two: The Policy Framework*, July 1998, 2 – 3.

In conclusion, given its geographical position at one of the crossroads of the world, Gibraltar has played a significant role in the shape of European history and will, without doubt, have a role again in the future. Although only six and a half square kilometres in area, it commands control of the only entrance from the Atlantic into the Mediterranean, namely the Straits of Gibraltar, one of the busiest shipping routes in the world. With the continent of Africa just twenty-eight kilometres across the Straits to the south, Gibraltar has, throughout history, acted as a bridge for migration.

Recognising the strategic importance of Gibraltar and its value as a military staging post, its ownership has been the subject of many battles throughout history. Not only has possession proved vital for keeping the straits open for commerce, also, in times of conflict those in control of the Rock have had the ability to deny the enemy access to Europe and the Atlantic Ocean. Since Gibraltar became one of the UK's independent territories in the early eighteenth century it has served the Crown with distinction and proved to be 'as safe as a rock' in supporting British interests, indeed, this essay has shown that the UK gains significant benefits from its control of the Rock.

After the Second World War, as relations began to deteriorate between the Soviet Union and Western Europe, the significance of

Gibraltar as the bastion of the newly formed NATO's southern flank quickly became evident. With the Soviets maintaining a formidable deep-water fleet in the Black Sea, whose only access to the Atlantic was via the Straits of Gibraltar, this southern flank was regarded as one of the areas most vulnerable to Soviet aggression. Similarly, all seaborne reinforcements and supplies required by NATO forces in the Mediterranean had to pass through the Straits of Gibraltar. The logistical advantage of storing stocks of weapons and fuel close to a potential source of conflict was indisputable.

Spain became a full member of NATO in 1982 and following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the strategic and military objectives for NATO nations have changed, but the Organisation's new mission and expanded portfolio is still centred on the collective defence of Europe. As a NATO member, it might be appropriate and logical for control of Gibraltar and the Straits to fall to the Spanish. However, the military capability, and political will, of Spain to defend NATO's southern flank is questionable. Their Navy is smaller than that of the UK and still awaiting full modernisation. In terms of her foreign policy, it is unclear where Spain's true allegiance lies; although committed to both NATO and the EU, she places great emphasis on her bilateral relationship with the USA and appears preoccupied with events to the south in North Africa. With such a dispersive foreign and subsequent military policy, Spain does not hold the interests of NATO as a priority. In addition, the

loss of Gibraltar as a British military outpost would significantly weaken the UK's position as an influential force in the region.

Despite the downsizing of its military force in Gibraltar during the 1990s, the UK still regards the Rock as a military base capable of fulfilling a number of significant roles, in particular; as a naval dockyard and nuclear berthing facility, a military airfield, an observation and electronic intelligence gathering station, home to a regiment, and as a strategic command and control platform. The Strategic Defence Review of 1998 placed great emphasis on the British Armed Forces of the twenty first century being versatile, expeditionary and readily deployable with the ability to project power. It stated that the threat could come from anywhere and that the UK military forces would, in the future, need to go to the fight rather than waiting for it to come to them. Not only does Gibraltar provide an important military outpost for the UK, but is ideally suited to act as a flexible node and provide an extremely useful staging post for both British and other alliance foreign forces operating in the Mediterranean and Middle East. It is also a key communications and intelligence hub.

As a maritime nation, dependent on international trade, it makes eminent sense for Britain to retain active control over one of the world's major maritime chokepoints. Finally, with Africa viewed as an unstable continent that requires careful attention in the future,

Gibraltar offers the UK the ideal observation platform. Gibraltar's strategic geographical location at the mouth of the Mediterranean and right next door to North Africa ensure that the Rock still has a vital role to play in Great Britain's future world interests.

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