Interview - Emma Salisbury

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Emma Salisbury is the Research Fellow in the Sea Power Laboratory at the Council on Geostrategy, an Associate Fellow at the Royal Navy Strategic Studies Centre, and a Contributing Editor at War on the Rocks. She holds a PhD and an MSc from Birkbeck College, University of London, and an MA from the University of Oxford. She publishes widely on naval operations and strategy, military innovation, the defence-industrial base, procurement, and British and American defence policy.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The current geopolitical uncertainty is deeply anxiety-inducing, but it is at least giving rise to some fresh debates as the world changes inexorably around us. The proliferation of threats to the rules-based international order (if such a thing ever really existed) means that we have to think through new scenarios as well as the possibilities of multiple crises happening at the same time. A particular focus for me is how Europe will deal with a level of withdrawal of American security guarantees at a time of imminent threat from Russia – how Europe can best defend itself after decades of reliance on the United States, what the future of NATO looks like, and how new security structures can be built quickly and resiliently enough to deter Russian aggression. I am also interested in how warfare is changing with new technology, particularly uncrewed systems – and how the war in Ukraine teaches us fresh ways of fighting, linking together the old and the new.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Even though I am still technically young, my lifetime has seen repeated groundbreaking shifts in how the world fits together – from the end of the Cold War, to the American unipolar moment, to the Global War on Terror, to our current phase of great-power competition. What has most shaped how I understand and cope with this is history. Naming all of the historians whose work has helped me make sense of the world would require more space than I can take here, but the core journey of understanding that they have all led me on has given me the ability to place what feel like wildly unprecedented events into their proper contexts – better understanding what went before, how the patterns of causation run, and how things connect together. History does not repeat, but it often rhymes, and building up a repository of knowledge has helped me to make sense of the world.

How vital is a strong maritime-industrial base for the UK's national security, and how does it intersect with broader geostrategic concerns?

The various maritime industries were once a cornerstone of the British economy, but they are facing a series of complex challenges that need to be tackled – otherwise, the UK will not be able to build ships, generate energy offshore, maintain a skilled workforce, and keep maritime logistics running smoothly. Reinvigorating these once-mighty industries would be valuable for promoting not only national security, but also a stronger British economy and the prosperity of communities around shipyards, ports, and maritime manufacturing sites around the country. It is a cliché to say that the UK is an island nation, but it is true – a country surrounded by seas should prioritise its maritime security and prosperity.

You recommend establishing a Maritime Innovation Hub to target increased government R&D support. What specific innovations do you believe should be prioritised, and how would you structure this hub to maximise its effectiveness?

There is considerable scope for innovation within the maritime field. A core area will be the design of vessels and their propulsion, particularly around the growing need for environmentally sustainable shipping, both for new ships and the retrofitting or upgrading of existing ships. Uncrewed surface and subsurface systems will be key for many tasks, including maintenance, offshore operations and data collection. New digital methods around ship management, networking, autonomous navigation and logistics support can enhance operations for both crewed and uncrewed vessels. The construction and maintenance of vessels could benefit from innovation in areas such as lean manufacturing, automation, 3D printing, predictive maintenance and advanced materials.

I have recommended that the government should set up a Maritime Innovation Hub, based in the Department for Business and Trade, but working closely with other responsible departments and agencies. The Hub would be tasked with strategically coordinating increased government investment in maritime-related R&D, identifying gaps and barriers that require intervention and providing a central point of contact between government, industry and academic institutions in the pursuit of technological advancement across the maritime domain. Issues like innovation cross over the work of so many departments that they can fall through the cracks – having a central body that is responsible for an issue can help to focus minds and ensure that progress is made.

With Russian ships increasingly transiting the Channel, how should the Royal Navy adapt its presence and partnerships to deter hybrid threats like espionage or infrastructure sabotage?

Presence is the best deterrence in British waters – the Royal Navy has done excellent work shadowing Russian ships travelling through the Channel and should be resourced to continue to do so. It is not just warships that need watching: ever since the days of the Cold War, Moscow has used its research ships for civilian and military purposes, from intelligence gathering to surveillance to sabotage. The deep-sea capabilities of the current dual-use fleet highlight the potential for deliberate damage to undersea cables and pipelines in the guise of something like seabed research.

Any response to Russian threats will be most effective when it is a collaboration – particularly through NATO. For example, British P-8A Poseidon and Rivet Joint aircraft are being deployed to support a NATO-led operation called BALTIC SENTRY, boosting maritime surveillance in the Baltic Sea. The UK should continue to work closely with European NATO allies to make clear to Russia that hybrid threats will not be tolerated.

How might China's increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean and beyond affect trade routes and security interests of European nations, and what collaborative measures can be taken to address these concerns?

As a major trading nation, the UK relies heavily on maritime routes in the Indo-Pacific for the transportation of goods, energy resources, and raw materials. Any significant disruption of these routes due to conflict in the region would lead to increased shipping costs, supply chain disruptions, and shortages of essential goods and commodities. The UK ought to continue to work with nations which support a stable and open international order and the protection of global public goods, while balancing and competing against nations that do not – China falls firmly in the latter camp. Strengthening maritime cooperation with like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific is particularly important. Enhanced interoperability and information sharing among naval forces, particularly through exercises in-theatre and deployments such as Carrier Strike Group 2025, will help to deter Chinese aggression and enable friendly nations to cooperate to respond effectively to crisis situations in regions of mutual concern.

What role does the trilateral security partnership AUKUS play in the broader context of countering China's expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific?

The AUKUS deal seeks to enhance allied security in the Indo-Pacific region as a response to growing geopolitical

tensions there. The agreement is a product of rising concern around the expanding influence and military might of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which has not only significantly increased its military investment – particularly in the maritime domain – but is also engaging in assertive territorial claims in regional waters, centred around the South China Sea and Taiwan.

The AUKUS deal represents a significant landmark in collaboration between like-minded nations on security and defence, focused on ensuring a resilient response to PRC aggression. The trilateral relationship not only provides a solid framework for cooperation between the US, UK, and Australia but also gives reassurance to other Indo-Pacific states that share concerns about stability and the balance of power in the region vis-à-vis the PRC.

You recommend that the UK should have a "Plan B" for future submarine capability. What might such a contingency plan entail, and how should it be developed alongside AUKUS commitments?

The development and construction of the new SSN-AUKUS boats is a core part of the AUKUS agreement, as both the Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy will procure and operate them. This means that the success of this part of the deal will directly affect the future fleets of both the UK and Australia. Both will need next-generation SSNs (nuclear-powered submarines), but should the deal fall through, it is unclear what would happen for either navy. Britain cannot afford to be left without a future SSN fleet. The Royal Navy's SSNs provide a vital capability for national defence, and there should be a concrete plan for the future replacement of the Astute class that is currently in service. While the SSN-AUKUS design will be the optimal path forward, the UK needs to manage the risk of the deal not coming to fruition. There should, therefore, be a design process for a new SSN that could be procured without the AUKUS agreement – one which does not include the various technologies that the US would share as part of the deal. This 'Plan B' SSN could be procured for both the Royal Navy and the Royal Australian Navy, keeping the benefits of the SSN-AUKUS for the UK and Australia if the original plan falls through.

Looking ahead, what indicators should policymakers watch to gauge whether AUKUS is delivering on its promise of enhancing collective security in the Indo-Pacific?

With any project that is intended as a deterrent, it can be difficult to gauge success – you are trying to make an actor not do something, but it is hard to prove that they didn't because of your deterrent rather than due to other factors. The best measure of success will not just encompass AUKUS, but also the myriad other ways of enhancing collective security in the region. Ultimately, a successful AUKUS will contribute to the goal scenario in the Indo-Pacific – a safe and secure Taiwan, a calm South China Sea, and a strong network of partnerships between capable navies and free nations.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Firstly, read! A thirst for knowledge will be the best thing to set you up for success. Read or listen to books, the news, podcasts, discussions – on any and all topics that intrigue you. You never know when something unrelated will give you a flash of understanding or make a connection you hadn't appreciated.

Secondly, connect! Find colleagues, mentors, and friends who share your interests, read their work, discuss the knotty issues, ask for help and give it in return. I would not be where I am today without the kindness and the insight of many, many people. Your support network will get you through a great deal and help you to refine and improve your work.

Thirdly, disconnect! The hardest piece of advice for me to follow myself, but that won't stop me giving it. Take time for yourself, for your family, for your friends, for rest. Whatever gives you joy and peace, make space for it regularly – going for a walk in the woods, eating something delicious, watching a movie with a loved one. No good will ever come of your burning out.