

## Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC)



### U.K. CARRIER CAPABILITY RETURNS TO THE INDO-PACIFIC

JUNE 14, 2021

*By David Scott*

Toward the end of May 2021, first the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and then the Queen visited the British flag ship, the aircraft carrier HMS *Queen Elizabeth* at Portsmouth. In effect this was their wave-off as, amid much commentary and following much anticipation, the Carrier Strike Group (CSG) set off from Portsmouth for a seven-month long deployment, its first maiden operational deployment. One Australian newspaper ran the [headline](#): “Rule, Britannia! UK deploys carriers to Indo-Pacific.”

In April 2021, the British Defense Secretary [Ben Wallace](#) set out the aims of the CSG deployment:

“It will be flying the flag for Global Britain – projecting our influence, signaling our power, engaging with our friends and reaffirming our commitment to addressing the security challenges of today and tomorrow.”

Engaging with friends of course raises the questions of who is not being engaged with, who is not a U.K. friend, and is there any common enemy in sight – all of which points to China.

Global Britain reflects this reorientation of a post-Brexit UK away from the European Union and outwards to other parts of the world. It is no surprise that the U.K. is now talking, in its *Integrated Review*, of a “[tilt to the Indo-Pacific](#),” given the increasing economic weight of this region. This economic shift brings with it a greater focus on sea lane security, protecting commerce flows, and freedom of navigation in international waters. Admiral [Tony Radakin](#), the First Sea Lord, said in a speech at the Sea Power Conference, that the *Integrated Review* “signaled a maritime resurgence” for the U.K., operating through “the lens of classical geopolitics” in which the U.K. operations in “Mahan’s World Ocean” were aimed at “countering Chinese activity in the Asia-Pacific.”

This British naval deployment gives both political and operational support to the bigger U.S. efforts in the Indo-Pacific. The unstated rationale is sharing the burden against China. This was admitted as much by the British Defense Secretary [Wallace](#) admitted as much when he told the IISS think tank on the eve of the CSG setting forth, in a revealing China-application of the mission, that: “the UK’s fundamental strengths across the world is our friends and allies and that’s how we are going to force-multiply.” and that the “dawn of China on the USA is that USA is coming across a power it unilaterally cannot challenge and it realizes it needs alliances.”

### Structure and Itinerary

The structure of the Strike Carrier Group is two-fold. First it is a powerful deployment of British assets, namely:

- Aircraft Carrier: HMS *Queen Elizabeth*
- Type-45 destroyers: HMS *Defender* and HMS *Diamond*;
- Type-23 anti-submarine frigates, HMS *Kent* and HMS *Richmond*
- *Astute*-class nuclear submarine
- Royal Fleet Auxiliary logistics ships *Fort Victoria* and *Tidespring*

Two offshore patrol vessels, HMS *Tamar* and HMS *Spey*, have also been dispatched westwards across the Pacific where they will join the Carrier Strike Group. Such a deployment accounts for a significant portion of the U.K. surface fleet, which currently totals only 19 frigates and destroyers. As well as various stealth fighters, four *Wildcat* maritime attack helicopters, seven *Merlin* Mk2 anti-submarine helicopters and three *Merlin* Mk4 commando helicopters were embarked – the greatest quantity of helicopters assigned to a single British Task Group in a decade. A company of Royal Marines was also carried.

Second, while the British component is substantive, it also involves allied support. In part this is with non-British ships embedded into the CSG, namely:

- U.S. destroyer: USS *The Sullivans*, for air defense and anti-submarine value
- Dutch frigate: HNLMS *Evertse*
- Two Australian frigates in the South China Sea
- New Zealand naval unit in the Pacific part of the deployment

The other area where the U.K. is using allied assets is in the CSG’s air component. Here, eight British F-35B *Lightning* strike aircraft are deployed on HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, with the bigger part of the warship’s fast-jet strike force actually made up of ten U.S. Marine Corps F-35s. To date

Britain has only ordered 48 of the short-take-off, vertical-landing aircraft version of the F-35B, to be delivered by 2024, with deliveries currently standing at 21.

Led by HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, the strike group will interact with 40 states across the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and Indo-Pacific, various allies, partners, and 'like minded' states. Amid those 40 states, China is absent.

The voyage will include a stop in Gibraltar, exercises (including anti-submarine warfare drills) with NATO and non-NATO partners around the Suez Canal, and a week-long stopover in Duqm, the British navy's base in Oman. The use of the U.K. Joint Logistics Support Base at Duqm operationalizes its deep water carrier-supporting facilities, in which Duqm has been envisaged as a support and forward projection base for the U.K. in the Indian Ocean. *Queen Elizabeth's* strike group will then take part in:

- *Konkan* joint exercises with the Indian navy in the Indian Ocean
- *Bersama Lima* exercises (probably in the South China Sea) with Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand as part of a strengthened U.K. commitment to the Five Power Defense Agreements (FPDA)
- Two weeks of exercises with Japan and the U.S. in the West Pacific

It is no coincidence that over the course of the deployment the Carrier Strike Group will operate with Indian, Australian, Japanese, and U.S. units – in other words with the members of “the Quad” group of countries, a group with which the U.K. is seeking ever-closer ties.

Naval operations with Japan and the U.S. reflect the trilateral partnership cooperation agreements signed between the Japanese, U.S., and UK navies; first of all by Admiral [Phillip Jones](#) in October 2016 and then by Admiral [Tony Radakin](#) in November 2019. The joint exercises carried out with India reflect and further the [Carrier Capability Partnership](#) signed in March 2019. Moreover, the U.K. deployment is part of emerging “[carrier coordination](#)” emerging between the U.S., France and the U.K.. The [agreement](#) signed on June 3, 2021, at Toulon between the three countries' naval leaders specifically mentioned trilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

## **Significance and Context**

The significance of the CSG deployment is that it demonstrates the return of aircraft carrier capability to the U.K., and the ability of the U.K. to remain a naval power of some significance and with some global reach. Carrier aircraft capability had been lost in 2010 with the retirement of HMS *Ark Royal* and its *Harrier* jump jets. To reestablish this capability, the British government pursued the construction of two new 65,000 ton carriers during the 2010s.

Consequently, HMS *Queen Elizabeth* was commissioned in December 2017. HMS *Prince of Wales*, surviving defense cuts, was commissioned in December 2019. Carrier Group formations were reestablished in naval strategy. The aircraft carriers carry 5th generation F-35 strike aircraft, giving the CSG's air component significant range and punch.

The context for carrier deployment is the U.K.'s return to an “East of Suez” naval presence. This has involved renewed forward deployments and strengthened bases and facilities after a five

year hiatus from 2013-2017 in already infrequent deployments. Subsequently, 2018-2020 witnessed renewed and continuous, sometimes overlapping, deployments from the U.K. across the Indo-Pacific by various destroyers and frigates; in the shape of HMSs *Sutherland*, *Albion*, *Argyll*, *Montrose*, *Defender*, and *Enterprise*. A further British destroyer has been earmarked for deployment in the Indo-Pacific in late-2021.

Strengthened British bases and facilities are now seen across and around the Indian Ocean. At Bahrain, HMS *Jufair*, abandoned in 1971 was re-established in 2018, and the U.K. Joint Logistics Support Base was opened at Duqm the same year. Increased U.K. use of Diego Garcia has been evident since 2018. Finally, in Singapore the modest U.K. presence in the repair and logistics facility (British Defence Singapore Support Unit) at Sembawang wharf, was supplemented with the Defence Staff Office in 2017, amid subsequent talk of further reinforcement of the U.K. presence there.

A U.K. focus on the Indo-Pacific was given further impetus by Brexit and the need to secure trade deals across the Indo-Pacific – involving South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, Australia, India, and New Zealand, as well as seeking entry into the Trans-Pacific Partnership – which in turn has made security of sea lanes (commerce flows and shipping) of even greater significance for the U.K.

A further context for the dispatch of the CSG has been rising disquiet over China, both globally—over China’s challenge to rule of law norms, human rights violations (now including Xinjiang), and technology threat like Huawei’s G5 rollout— and in the Indo-Pacific region — by China’s suppression of Hong Kong, China’s militarization and excessive maritime claims in the South China Sea, and China’s Maritime Silk Road push across the Indian Ocean. The so-called “golden era” of U.K.-China relations talked about by the previous Cameron administration has given way to a less accommodating Johnson administration and with it some willingness to push back against China.

## **The China Factor**

Although originally the CSG deployment was pitched as aiming to strengthen freedom of navigation operations, most at issue in the South China Sea, in fact the deployment schedule has become more circumspect over China. Two particular issues have shown this U.K. circumspection: the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

The U.K. does not take any position on the different sovereignty claims in the area. Ironically perhaps, the U.K. had itself claimed the Spratly Island chain in the 1920s, a claim that, although subsequently dropped, should logically give U.K. sympathy to Malaysian and Brunei claims (the successor states to the British possessions of Malaya, Sarawak, Brunei and Sabah) vis-à-vis China. What the U.K. does reject, however, are the excessive claims made by China in the South China Sea, and it has called on China to accept the ruling of the Permanent Court for Arbitration.

The question is how far the CSG will involve itself in any of these issues. Then-Foreign Secretary [Johnson](#) told the press conference at the Australia-U.K. Ministerial meeting in 2017 that “one of the first things we will do with the two new colossal aircraft carriers that we have just built is send them on a FONOP – a freedom of navigation operation to this area.” [Mark](#)

[Field](#), the Minister for Asia and the Pacific, in pinpointing China as a threat to “the rules-based international system,” reiterated in March 2019 the British “commitment” to future naval deployments “reinforcing freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.” How far does the CSG deployment reinforce freedom of navigation in the South China Sea? There are various ways of doing this.

Firstly, previously the U.K. decided to have HMS *Albion* carry out a FONOP around the Paracel Islands in September 2018 to assert that China’s drawing of archipelagic baselines around the chain is invalid, since China itself is not an archipelagic state like Indonesia or the Philippines. Chinese outrage was high in 2018, and it may well be that the U.K. is now chary to repeating such an operation. If so, that would seem to be a pity, and in effect may cede those waters to China.

Secondly, in the Spratlys, the [Permanent Court of Arbitration](#) (PCA) ruling in July 2016 (point 383) ruled that the Hughes Reef, Gaven Reef (South), Subi Reef, Mischief Reef, and Second Thomas Shoal were “low tide elevations, i.e. under water at high tide. China’s reclamation (sand and concrete) building them up above high tide still left them as “artificial islands,” which under [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas \(UNCLOS\)](#) Article 60 merely had a 50-meter safety zone, rather than any 12-mile territorial waters or EEZ. The U.S. has made a point of sailing within the 12-mile territorial waters claimed by China for such artificial creations, but so far the UK has not. It could though.

Thirdly, another excessive claim is China’s demand that navies entering its Exclusive Economic Zone ask its permission. Like the U.S., the U.K. rejects this as a matter of principle. In addition, it supports the [PCA](#) ruling which specifically held (points 622, and 624) that none of the Paracels and Spratly features were “islands” under [UNCLOS](#) 121(3) sustaining ongoing “human habitation” or “economic life.” Instead they were above high tide “rocks” and, while entitled to 12-mile territorial waters, were not entitled to “island”-generated 200-mile EEZs. The 2016 [PCA](#) ruling also rejected China’s claims that their “historical rights” in themselves generate any EEZ. Indeed, it considered the “9-dash line” as “contrary to the [UNCLOS] Convention and without lawful effect” (point 278).

The CSG, or elements from it, could then carry out freedom of navigation operations around the Paracels (archipelagic excessive claims) and Spratlys (excessive claims over artificial islands) – but this has not been announced in advance. If this is deliberate avoidance of such activities, then it represents some tacit acceptance of Chinese pressure.

On the other hand, it may be that operational details are not being given in advance, and that CSG commanders have indeed instructions to carry out one or both of these types of freedom of navigation activities around the Paracels and/or Spratlys, on the spot and unannounced beforehand, so as to limit advance pressure that China would otherwise bring to bear. In this vein, U.K. transit through the South China Sea that goes within 200-miles of any of China-held features in the Paracels and Spratlys, since permission is not being sought, maintains their status as international waterways, and represents a minimum-level freedom of navigation operation. In going into, across, and through China’s nebulous “9-dash line”, the CSG could also be seen to be ignoring it.

A particularly pointed political decision would be if the CSG carried out exercises in the South China Sea with the U.S. Navy, which has been operating in greater carrier strength in the last few years. The precedent for bilateral U.K.-U.S. exercises in the South China Sea was on show during 2019, in January with HMS *Argyll*, and in February with HMS *Montrose*. Of course, there is already a U.S. destroyer embedded with the CSG in the shape of USS *The Sullivans*, so one could argue that explicit U.K.-U.S. naval cooperation in the South China Sea is being reiterated. Joint exercises with powerful U.S. forces are also already planned for the Philippine Sea, between the so-called first and second island chains in the Western Pacific.

A nearby China-related issue for the CSG is whether or not it (or elements of it) deploys westwards of Taiwan through the Taiwan Strait. As part of its campaign to squeeze Taiwan, China is increasingly starting to treat the Strait as domestic Chinese waters, and does not want to see foreign navies using it. It is worth noting that accelerating U.S. passage of the Taiwan Strait has been supported by some French and Canadian transit deployments.

HMS *Enterprise* attracted further Chinese ire by transiting through the Taiwan Strait in December 2019, before returning again to the South China Sea for a week-long stay in Vietnam in February 2020. Thus speculation remains that, when the CSG transits through the South China Sea to get to South Korea and Japan, a more circuitous route will be taken – going east of Taiwan, rather than westwards through the Taiwan Strait. Operational details in the Taiwan area, like those in the South China Sea have not been specified in advance, so it remains a possibility that the U.K. CSG, or an element of it, might deploy through the Taiwan Strait as a point of principle, unannounced beforehand.

### **Ongoing U.K. presence**

The final consideration is legacy. The U.K. will remain a modest player in the overall balance of naval power in the Indo-Pacific. The Royal Navy has a small increase in numbers envisaged for the 2020s but China far exceeds this. The First Sea Lord, Admiral [Phillip Jones](#), noted in November 2018 that with regard to China, “if you look at the scale of their shipbuilding program purely in terms of tonnage, it broadly equates [annually] to launching the equivalent of the whole Royal Navy.”

Nevertheless, two good-sized new aircraft carriers are not to be dismissed as inconsequential. The U.K. carrier capacity does generate useful leverage in cooperation with other similarly China-concerned states. Of course, this modest useful contribution will only be realized if this renewed involvement in the region is maintained and if forward deployment is persistent.

U.K. force structure for the region is being boosted. Current U.K. thinking, laid down in the [Integrated Review](#) is to “increase” maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific, “including to uphold freedom of navigation,” specifically through deployment of:

- Offshore Patrol Vessels from 2021
- Littoral Response Group from 2023
- *Type-31* frigates later in the decade

In addition, regular deployments from UK home waters are envisaged throughout the 2020s.

In the meantime, with the arrival of the HMS *Prince of Wales* aircraft carrier, and the completion of full F-35B air components, the U.K. will have two CSGs, raising the question of where they would be deployed. The answer seems to be one for the Atlantic-Mediterranean area, and the other for the Indo-Pacific. Regular ongoing CSG deployment has been envisaged from the outset. Admiral [Phillip Jones](#) stated in 2018 that “it is certain that a Royal Navy task group, centered on a *Queen Elizabeth*-class carrier, will regularly deploy East of Suez;” though leaving it unclear how far across the Indo-Pacific CSGs would regularly deploy, and how frequently “regularly” would mean. A timid U.K. response would be to keep CSG deployment within the Indian Ocean, a more robust response to help really address the problem of China would be to keep deploying its CSG further eastwards into the South China Sea and Western Pacific on a regular basis.

*Dr. David Scott is an associate member of the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies. A prolific [writer](#) on maritime geopolitics, he can be contacted at [davidscott366@outlook.com](mailto:davidscott366@outlook.com).*

Featured image: HMS Queen Elizabeth on her maiden deployment to the Indo-Pacific region.

Source: <https://cimsec.org/u-k-carrier-capability-returns-to-the-indo-pacific/>