

British government backs US war drive against North Korea, China

Simon Whelan and Robert Stevens
10 August 2017

A UK Foreign Office spokesman yesterday said the UK would “continue to work with the US and our international partners to maintain pressure on North Korea.”

The statement continued, “We have been consistently clear and forthright in our condemnation of North Korea’s destabilising and illegal behaviour, including through support for UN Security Council resolutions to bring in sanctions that will limit North Korea’s ability to pursue its nuclear weapons programme.”

Downing Street’s declaration was made in the immediate aftermath of President Donald Trump threatening Pyongyang with “fire and fury” in response to North Korea’s nuclear weapons programme. It is designed to contrast with the European Union and Germany’s expressed concern at what Chancellor Angela Merkel’s government called a “rhetorical escalation” between the US and North Korea.

A German Foreign Ministry spokesman, Martin Schaefer, said further “saber rattling” was unhelpful and called on “all parties to show restraint.” Schaefer added that Germany backs a proposal by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson for talks with North Korea, while the EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini’s spokeswoman, Catherine Ray, said “a lasting peace and denuclearization of the Korean peninsula must be achieved through peaceful means.” For Mogherini, “that excludes military action.”

Whatever the differences between the positions of Tillerson and Trump, the UK Conservative government has staked its post-Brexit future on being the most loyal ally of the US in all its military actions.

While in Australia on July 27, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson told an audience of Australian business heads and politicians at the Lowy Institute that the UK would commit UK aircraft carriers to secure “freedom of navigation” exercises in the waters of the South China

Sea.

“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 freedom of navigation operation to this area,” he said. They would patrol just a few miles off China’s coast, to “vindicate our belief in the rules-based international system and in the freedom of navigation through those waterways which are absolutely vital for world trade.”

British Defence Minister Michael Fallon, who accompanied the foreign secretary on the trip, added, “We have the right of freedom of navigation and we will exercise it.”

Last year Britain’s Royal Air Force sent four military aircraft to Japan for joint exercises in the same region. While in Australia, Fallon reminded his hosts, “We flew RAF Typhoons through the South China Sea last October and we will exercise that right whenever we next have the opportunity to do so, whenever we have ships or planes in the region.”

Tensions in the South China Sea have escalated due to the belligerent statements and actions of the Trump administration, which is challenging China’s control over the Spratly Islands—constructed or expanded in the South China Sea by Beijing.

Under the Obama administration, the US Navy sent guided missile destroyers on three earlier occasions within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around Chinese islets. Earlier this year, the US sent two bombers over the region, just a week after a US guided-missile destroyer deliberately intruded within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit claimed by China around Triton Island in the Paracel Islands.

During a visit designed to secure post-Brexit trade agreements, the two Tory government ministers agreed with their Australian counterparts that the two countries would strengthen arrangements to share classified

information on defence, security and counter-terrorism operations and conduct cooperative military activities in the Asia-Pacific region. They also discussed the deployment of soldiers in domestic counter-terrorism operations based on the UK's Operation Temperer—under which troops were deployed on the streets of Britain in May after the Manchester bombing—and legislation proposed recently in Australia.

After meeting with Johnson, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said the two had discussed the issue of the South China Sea as one of the pressing “challenges” of the Asia-Pacific region. The South China Sea is one of the busiest commercial sea routes in the world, carrying \$5 trillion worth of trade a year.

Just two days after his Australian speech, Johnson warned in response to a long-range missile test by Pyongyang, “The UK will stand alongside our allies and partners as we confront the growing threat North Korea poses to regional and international security.”

During the campaign for the June 8 British General Election Johnson said that North Korea must be disarmed. Speaking at the UN Security Council, he said, “Britain stands alongside our allies in making clear that North Korea must obey the UN and halt its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes—disarming in a complete, verifiable, and irreversible manner.”

Today US, British and Norwegian armed forces are concluding a 10-day North Sea war games exercise that began almost immediately after Johnson's declarations in Sydney.

Taking place off the northwest coast of Scotland, Britain's Carrier Strike Group linked up with the US aircraft carrier USS George H. W. Bush in a naval exercise codenamed Exercise Saxon Warrior.

The operation included 15 warships from various NATO countries, more than 100 aircraft and nearly 10,000 armed forces personnel. Among other ships deployed were two Type 23 frigates--HMS Westminster and HMS Iron Duke—the destroyer USS Donald Cook, missile cruiser USS Philippine Sea and the Norwegian frigate HNoMS Helge Ingstad.

The exercise paused briefly as the UK's just launched £3 billion aircraft carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth--currently undergoing sea trials before entering service—sailed alongside it. Measuring 280 metres and weighing 65,000 tonnes, the HMS Queen Elizabeth is the largest ship ever built for the Royal Navy. Britain's second new carrier, HMS Prince of Wales, is being fitted out ahead of its expected launch in 2020.

The USS George H. W. Bush took part following its deployment in the Middle East, where its jet fighters “conducted more than 30 strikes against ISIS targets,” according to the *Daily Mail*.

The US Navy said the exercise was carried out to develop “theatre-specific combat skills” and enhance cooperation between multi-national forces. It would offer a “myriad of challenges to the multi-national and multi-platform force by creating a diverse and unpredictable war environment based on fictional geo-political and military scenarios.”

The UK Defence Journal cited Commander Eric Retz, US Navy Carrier Strike Group 2's operations officer, who said, “Saxon Warrior will test every aspect of our war-fighting capabilities—from air wing strikes to the self-defence of the carrier.”

Ahead of HMS Queen's Elizabeth's launch, British armed forces personnel have been embedded with the USS George H. W. Bush, to “learn and build their individual and ultimately collective skill set,” said Commodore Andrew Bretton, the commander of the Royal Navy's carrier strike group.

Britain has not been able to deploy its own aircraft carrier since the Ark Royal was decommissioned in 2011.

Bretton told the Press Association, “We have been out of carrier strike operations for several years, so the opportunity to learn from our American cousins is extremely welcome, and has been really important in enabling us to accelerate that programme.”

Captain Jerry Kyd, HMS Queen Elizabeth Commanding Officer, described the US-led fleet as an “awesome embodiment of maritime power projection. And given that the United Kingdom's Carrier Strike Group Commander and his staff are embedded on board the US carrier for Saxon Warrior shows the closeness of our relationship with the US Navy and the importance that both nations place on the delivery of the UK's Carrier Strike programme.”

Kyd emphasised, “HMS Queen Elizabeth is at the start of her journey to generate to full warfighting capability, but we are working hard to ready ourselves to take our place in operations and the line of battle alongside our closest allies.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact