

UK to send largest Carrier Strike Group since Falklands/Malvinas war to South China Sea

Robert Stevens
29 April 2021

The British government has given details on the massive Royal Navy/Royal Air Force Carrier Strike Group being sent to the Indo-Pacific region. The mission, described as “a truly global deployment, from the North Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific,” provocatively includes sailing through the South China Sea. It could depart as early as May 18.

The NATO-backed mission is being led by the UK’s new £3.2 billion aircraft carrier, HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, on its first operational deployment. The carrier, the navy’s largest and most powerful warship ever, was launched in October 2017 and has been involved in sea trials and operational training since. It is described by the Navy as being “able to strike from the sea at a time and place of our choosing...”

No Royal Navy force has been mobilised on such a scale since the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas war. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) said it would be the ‘largest concentration of maritime and air power to leave the UK in a generation. The *Spectator* noted the significance of the Royal Navy sending a “battle fleet to Asia for the first time since the start of the Korean War in 1950.”

With the end of the Cold War, Britain’s Royal Navy surface fleet of frigates and destroyers was scaled down and now contains just 19 vessels. But spending is being hiked up again by tens of billions of pounds across all the armed forces as part of the MoD’s “Defence in a Competitive Age” review.

The Indo-Pacific mission enlists much of the current strength of the entire navy. The aircraft carrier will have 18 F-35B stealth fighters on board and be backed by the Type 45 destroyers, HMS Defender and HMS Diamond; Type 23 anti-submarine frigates, HMS Kent and HMS Richmond; and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary’s logistics ships, Fort Victoria and Tidespring. These will be backed by a latest Astute-class nuclear submarine armed with Tomahawk Cruise missiles. Also participating will be 14 naval helicopters, eight RAF fast jets and a company of Royal Marines.

The carrier group will visit more than 40 countries over 28 weeks covering 26,000 nautical miles. It will take part in 70 engagements, including exercises with NATO and non-

NATO partners when sailing through the Mediterranean to the Suez Canal. The US is participating with a destroyer, USS *The Sullivans*, and a squadron of 10 US Marine Corps F-35B Lightning II aircraft.

The Royal Navy strike group will stop for a week at Duqm, the UK’s Joint Logistics Support Base in Oman. It will then conduct Indian Ocean operations with the Indian navy as well as joint exercises with South Korea and Singapore. Operations will be completed with up to two weeks of joint exercises with American and Japanese armed forces. The flotilla will carry out its provocative sailing of the South China Sea.

The UK’s Integrated Review, “Global Britain in a Competitive Age,” and the Defence Review both identified China and Russia as major adversaries and economic threats. The Integration Review describes China as “a systemic competitor. China’s increasing power and international assertiveness is likely to be the most significant geopolitical factor of the 2020s”. It stated, “the UK will deepen our engagement in the Indo-Pacific...establishing a greater and more persistent presence than any other European country. The region is already critical to our economy and security; is a focal point for the negotiation of international laws, rules and norms; and will become more important to UK prosperity over the next decade.”

In line with US imperialism’s designs on the region, with the UK acting as a junior partner, the MoD said the mission was “part of the UK’s tilt towards the Indo-Pacific region... it will help achieve the UK’s goal for deeper engagement in the Indo-Pacific region in support of shared prosperity and regional stability”.

The mission was described by Defence Minister Ben Wallace as part of post-Brexit’s Britain’s strategy to secure markets: “When our carrier strike group sets sail next month, it will be flying the flag for Global Britain, projecting our influence, signalling our power, engaging with our friends and reaffirming our commitment to addressing the security challenges of today and tomorrow...” The deployment showed that Britain was ready to “play an

active role in shaping the international system of the 21st century”.

Last week, after an extended campaign by leading warmongers within the political establishment, MPs voted, based on unsubstantiated claims, that China is carrying out “genocide” against Uyghur Muslims. Britain joins the US government and just three other legislatures, in Belgium, the Netherlands and Canada in accusing Beijing of genocide.

The House of Commons passed unanimously a non-binding motion put forward by Tory MP Nusrat Ghani, stating, “Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region are suffering Crimes Against Humanity and Genocide; and calls on the Government to act to fulfil its obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide and all relevant instruments of international law to bring it to an end.”

Ghani was one of five UK MPs sanctioned by China last month, along with several anti-China front groups such as China Research and the Conservative Human Rights Commission. This was in response to co-ordinated sanctions by the UK, European Union, US and Canada against Chinese officials designed to escalate geopolitical tensions.

On behalf of the opposition Labour Party, Shadow Foreign Office minister Stephen Kinnock said the party backed the motion as 'genocide can never be met with indifference or inaction'.

The vote marks a new ascendency of anti-China hawks, led by former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith. They have tried without success to introduce a Bill that would empower the UK's High Court with the right to decide whether a country is committing genocide. In March, Smith failed for the third time to secure an amendment to the Trade Bill, with the aim of using it to escalate sanctions and other measures against China based on the “genocide” claims. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's has tried to balance between Washington and Beijing.

Indicative of the escalating war fever among the imperialist powers, with China and Russia in their cross hairs, was the bellicose response of leading Tory MPs—with close connections to the military—who insisted that May's mission to the South China Sea was not provocative enough. Chiming in with recent statements from the Biden administration and US Pacific Fleet commander, Adm. John Aquilino, that Taiwan was “the most significant flashpoint now that could lead to a large-scale war” between the US and China, the MPs insisted that the strike group also enter the Taiwan Strait as part of the onward voyage up to Japan.

Duncan Smith told the *Telegraph*, “I'm pleased the Aircraft Carrier is deploying in the South China Sea but they need to complete this process by letting the Chinese know

that they disapprove of their very aggressive actions against their neighbours by sailing through the Taiwan Strait.”

He was backed by Tobias Ellwood, chairman of the Defence Select Committee, who said the Indo-Pacific mission had been “rolled out as such an important statement of intent” but was worried it could be “diminished” over “fear of offence”. Avoiding the Taiwan Strait defeated the operation's “purpose”, which “is to stand up to the authoritarianism of China”.

Such comments offer insight into the unhinged thinking in sections of ruling circles and among the military top brass, who are contemplating armed conflict with nuclear powers.

Following the UK's Defence Review, the *Telegraph* published a “special report” by senior foreign correspondent Roland Oliphant, “China and Russia's military arsenals are terrifying in scale—but how would they perform in combat?”

It describes China's navy as “already the largest in the world with approx 350 ships and submarines, including over 130 major surface combatants. It is expected to have five aircraft carriers afloat by 2030 and is rapidly expanding its fleet of destroyers. It has developed long-range precision cruise and ballistic missiles, early warning radars and air defence systems to allow it to dominate airspace far into the Pacific.” Moreover, “it recently unveiled hypersonic weapons designed to take on US carrier groups.”

All this was no big deal, he added, as “the People's Liberation Army [active personnel over 2 million and reserve personnel over 1 million] is not necessarily invincible. The military faces major personnel challenges, struggling to recruit, train and retain professional soldiers and facing down a morale problem fuelled by perceived corruption. And it has not fought a war in more than 40 years.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact