

UK-led Carrier Strike Group heads for South China Sea

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NATO's UK-led Carrier Strike Group (CSG21) has completed military exercises in the Indian Ocean, after transiting the Suez Canal earlier this month.

The Carrier Strike Group, with its main warship the HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier, was launched in May, beginning a 28-week deployment spanning over 26,000 nautical miles. Alongside Elizabeth are six Royal Navy ships, a Royal Navy submarine, US Navy destroyer The Sullivans, and a frigate from the Netherlands. The Carrier Strike Group is carrying out over 70 engagements and exercises with 40 nations across the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific and, in the next days, a provocative operation against China in the South China Sea. Following this, a series of exercises will be held in the Philippines Sea with the US, Australia, France, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea.

Last Wednesday, CSG21 began three days of operations after meeting up with the Indian Navy in the Bay of Bengal. The exercises involved 10 ships, two submarines, approximately 20 aircraft and almost 4,000 personnel. The mission represents a deepening of military relations between Britain and India, with a British High Commission, New Delhi statement explaining, "An Indian warship will also exercise with the Royal Navy off the coast of the UK in August."

The statement, published on the UK government website, declared, "The deployment represents the UK's commitment to deepening diplomatic, economic and security ties with India and in the Indo-Pacific region. It demonstrates both the UK's support for the freedom of passage through vital trading routes and for a free, open and inclusive order in the Indo-Pacific."

It adds, "From defending democratic values and tackling shared threats, to seizing new trade opportunities through engagements with Singapore, the Republic of Korea, Japan, India and others, the deployment marks a step-change in UK engagement in the region."

CSG21 has been portrayed as carrying out a series of exercises to ensure that the Elizabeth, one of the UK's two

new aircraft carriers, is "battle ready". A review of the operations already carried out, in regions of the world that are tinderboxes, shows how reckless the entire venture is.

Its first move on leaving base at Portsmouth was to participate in the NATO exercise Steadfast Defender, held from May 20 to May 28 off the coast of Portugal. Alongside CSG21 were the USS Iwo Jima Amphibious Ready Group, and Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 and 2 which include eight to twelve destroyer warships and frigates.

In June, a Russian patrol ship fired warning shots at the CSG21 British destroyer HMS Defender and a Russian warplane dropped bombs in its path, after Defender entered waters in the Black Sea off the coast of Crimea, which is claimed by Russia. The UK's provocation was sanctioned by the United States as part of a long-planned operation.

Russia warned that if such an incursion was repeated by the UK, then it would bomb any warships involved. Despite these warnings, further military exercises aimed against Russia have been launched.

On July 9, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that UK Merlin helicopters "hunted" a Russian submarine which the newspaper claimed "stalked the Royal Navy's Carrier Strike Group (CSG)" when the task force passed through the eastern Mediterranean. The helicopters dropped sonobuoys to listen for the distinctive sounds of submarines. The *Telegraph* noted, "The hunt for the submarine took place four days after the confrontation in the Black Sea between HMS Defender, a Type-45 air defence ship, and Russian forces."

Ukraine and the UK are due to begin a series of military exercises, Operation Cossack Mace, this month. The exercises, in preparation for a land conflict with Russia, involve military forces from the US, UK, Denmark, Sweden and Canada. The British Army announced July 15, "Over the next few weeks soldiers from the 4th Battalion, The Royal Regiment of Scotland (4 SCOTS), will be in Ukraine taking part in Exercise Cossack Mace, in partnership with soldiers from the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU)."

The 4th Battalion were deployed in the imperialist wars in

Afghanistan and Iraq.

The day prior to the Black Sea events, UK and US Marine Corps F35B jets carried out operational sorties in the Middle East—the first combat missions ever flown from the Elizabeth—in support of Operation Shader and US Operation Inherent Resolve. Set up in 2014, ostensibly to target Islamic State, both operations consist of constant air strikes and hostile surveillance missions in a host of countries including Iraq, Syria, Libya, Tunisia and Lebanon.

While located in the Mediterranean, the Elizabeth completed joint naval training June 1-4 with the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle. Exercise Gallic Strike involved 15 ships and 57 aircraft and included a sea-to-land strike simulation and joint manoeuvres between French Rafale marine and F-35B aircraft.

Another Mediterranean operation participated in by CSG21 was Falcon Strike 21, a multinational training exercise from June 7-15 led by the Italian Air Force. The exercise, carried out from Italy's Amendola Air Base, saw F-35 Lightning stealth fighters from four nations train together for the first time. Captain James Blackmore, commander of HMS Queen Elizabeth's Carrier Air Group, commented that the exercise was based on harnessing "the full potential of these enormously powerful aircraft and apply[ing] their advanced capabilities to an increasingly complex and contested battle space."

The UK's Ministry of Defence noted of the use of F35B jets during Operation Shader and US Operation Inherent Resolve that "for the CSG21, which has spent previous weeks in the Mediterranean working with NATO allies and partners, it marks a change of emphasis. From exercises and international engagements, the Carrier Strike Group is now delivering its full might of naval and air power..."

Commodore Steve Moorhouse, Commander of the United Kingdom Carrier Strike Group, said, "The Carrier Strike Group's period working with our NATO partners in the Atlantic, Mediterranean and Black Seas offers unmistakable proof that the United Kingdom's most important overseas defence commitment remains the security of the Euro-Atlantic region."

He boasted, "While HMS Queen Elizabeth launched counter-Daesh missions over Iraq and Syria from the Eastern Mediterranean, HMS Defender and HNLMS Evertsen were conducting concurrent operations 1,600 miles away in the Black Sea—true strategic reach."

On July 12, the Elizabeth and the USS Ronald Reagan carrier strike group, alongside the Iwo Jima Amphibious Ready Group, conducted a "large scale joint interoperability exercise" in the Gulf of Aden. The USS Ronald Reagan is the only forward deployed United States aircraft carrier. The Royal Navy reported that the two-day operation "saw the

three navy task groups, comprising US, UK and Dutch ships, test their abilities in anti-air, anti-surface and anti-submarine warfare tactics and techniques."

The "crews practised manoeuvring in close formation, hunting simulated enemy submarines and defending against simulated adversaries in the air."

CSG21 proceeds to the South China Sea under conditions in which the Biden administration in the US has ramped up tensions with Beijing. Secretary of State Antony Blinken issued a provocative statement July 11 dismissing China's claim to the South China Sea. "Nowhere is the rules-based maritime order under greater threat than in the South China Sea," Blinken stated, warning, "The United States reaffirms its July 13, 2020 [Trump administration] policy regarding maritime claims in the South China Sea."

Just days later, Boris Johnson's UK government confirmed that the Carrier Strike Group would complete its planned South China Sea operation and hinted that this could have dire military consequences. According to the *Daily Mail*, on a visit to Tokyo last week, Defence Minister Ben Wallace "declined to say whether the fleet would breach the 12-mile zone around military bases China has built on disputed rocks in the South China Sea."

A vocal section of Johnson's ruling Conservative Party, led by former party leader Sir Iain Duncan Smith and backed by sections of the military, are demanding Downing Street and the armed forces "rethink this journey" and sail even more provocatively through the Taiwan Strait. US Pacific Fleet commander, Adm. John Aquilino, has declared Taiwan "the most significant flashpoint now that could lead to a large-scale war" between the US and China.

The possibility of a conflagration involving nuclear powers is ever present in these events. Speaking in Japan, Wallace declared, "The world is a more anxious place, and as a result more on edge... There is definitely a danger that that anxiousness tips into more aggressive measures, but I think we are still some way off a military conflict in Asia."



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