

UK Starmer government sends Carrier Strike Group to Indo-Pacific amid raging global tensions

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The *Prince of Wales* aircraft carrier left its Portsmouth, England base on Tuesday this week for an eight month deployment to the Indo-Pacific. Dubbed Operation Highmast, the carrier is the lead ship in the UK's Carrier Strike Group 25 (UKCSG).

As the *Prince of Wales* met up with other ships and prepared to leave UK shores off Cornwall, Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer boarded on Thursday, declaring, "We are sending a clear message of strength to our adversaries, and a message of unity and purpose to our allies. National security is the foundation of my government's Plan for Change. We have announced the largest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the Cold War..."

NATO allies Norway, Spain and Canada are also contributing ships with 12 nations involved in the flotilla.

En-route the UKCSG will sail through the Mediterranean during which it will participate in a major NATO exercise, Neptune Strike 25. NATO said that operation will involve "multiple aircraft carrier and amphibious strike groups. Accompanying the long-range strike activities across NATO's Southern and South-Eastern flank will be the execution of anti-submarine warfare capabilities in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea."

The vessels will then traverse the Red Sea and Bab-el-Mandeb Strait chokepoint, which connects the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, as the US ratchets up its UK-backed war against Yemen. On April 12, a US aircraft carrier, *Carl Vinson*, and seven accompanying ships arrived in the Red Sea to join the *Harry S. Truman* Carrier Strike Group for further military operations against the Houthis.

In the Indian Ocean, Highmast will conduct exercises with the US, India, Singapore and Malaysia, and take part with 19 other nations in Exercise Talisman Sabre near Australia, and train alongside the Japanese Self Defence Forces.

These missions in global flashpoints can only fuel tensions between the major powers.

The 2021 Carrier Strike Group—the inaugural mission of

the UK's other carrier, *HMS Queen Elizabeth*—played a pivotal role in NATO provocations off the coast of Crimea, resulting in a Russian patrol ship firing warning shots at a UK destroyer, HMS Defender, and Russian fighter jets dropping bombs in its path. Just months later Russia invaded Ukraine.

This year's CSG operation was first announced in December 2023 by the Sunak Conservative government and recommitted to by the newly elected Starmer Labour government in December.

Starmer came to power as leader of the "party of NATO" committed to increasing military spending, backing war against Russia and supporting Israeli's genocide against the Palestinians. He pledged to increase military spending to 2.5 percent of GDP by 2027, with Chancellor Rachel Reeves pledging a further £2.2 billion for the Armed Forces in her Spring Statement.

The government has committed substantial resources to this year's CSG. In terms of its air power capability, Highmast is deploying the largest maritime force of British combat jets since the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas war.

The *Prince of Wales* will carry up to 24 F-35B fighter jets, along with an undisclosed number of T-150 Malloy and Puma drones. Other warships in the mission are the Type 45 destroyer HMS Dauntless, which specialises in air defence, and HMS Richmond, a Type 23 frigate specialising in anti-submarine activity and carrying Sting Ray torpedoes. The CSG is backed by an Astute Class Submarine armed with Spearfish torpedoes and Tomahawk cruise missiles. Around 4,000 Armed Forces personnel are involved—2,500 from the Royal Navy; 592 from the Royal Air Force and around 900 personnel from the British Army.

Commodore James Blackmore, the commander of the Carrier Strike Group, confirmed to the *Telegraph* that the CSG was primed for combat at any stage during the mission, saying, "What I have to be always cognisant of is the ability to defend myself and also the ability to go and strike if asked

to. That's what a Carrier Strike Group does, that focus on that middle word, 'strike'. That's also the inherent agility of a Carrier Strike Group—we have a plan, that's a plan we will go and execute, but at every stage of that plan I'm ready to be ordered to go and do something different and that's everything, up to and including combat operations if asked for.”

Operation Highmast, as an April 8 Ministry of Defence statement emphasised, is vital to the economic interests of British imperialism. It noted, “Trade between the UK and Indo-Pacific accounted for 17% of total trade between the UK and all trading partners in the 12 months to September 2024, with the total amount traded in goods and services between the UK and Indo-Pacific standing at £286 billion in the same period.”

The 2021 CSG followed an unravelling of a previous thawing in UK-China relations as the Johnson Tory government fell into line with the anti-China stance of the first Trump administration. There were demands then that the Royal Navy carry out a provocative transit through the Taiwan Strait, claimed by the Chinese government as territorial waters. Former Tory leader Iain Duncan Smith and the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China upped the ante at every opportunity to demonise Beijing.

Feeling the wind in their sails with the second Trump administration targeting China as its main global adversary, Duncan Smith et al. incessantly demand that China be designated a “systemic threat”.

Seeking more harmonious relations with China as integral to economic growth, Chancellor Reeves—with major business figures in tow—visited Beijing in January before Trump's inauguration, following a visit there by Foreign Secretary David Lammy the previous month.

The grievances of the anti-China hawks were aired by the pro-Tory *Telegraph* April 2 in a piece, “Royal Navy ready to defy China in Taiwan Strait”. It noted, “The deployment comes as tensions between the UK and China have increased over spying fears and the row triggered by the UK Government taking control of British Steel from its Chinese owner.”

The “2021 Carrier Strike Group avoided sailing through the Strait to avoid provoking China. At the time senior Conservative MPs accused the Government of failing to stand up to an increasingly assertive Beijing,” it continued, adding that “If Carrier Strike Group 2025 does not transit through the Strait on this voyage, it will be seen as further evidence of the UK cosyng up to Xi Jinping, the Chinese president.”

Sections of the political elite are concerned that confronting China at this juncture only diverts resources from anti-Russian operations. At a session of the House of

Commons Defence Committee last month Liberal Democrat MP Mike Martin, a former Army Reserve officer, asked Armed Forces minister Luke Pollard, “If we send that carrier strike group with all of the other assets—naval, air, and all the rest of it... What is the opportunity cost in the Euro-Atlantic security area? What is not being done here in our region because of that deployment?”

Pollard replied, “Deploying the carrier to the Indo-Pacific directly supports our ability to protect the NATO area of operations in the future, because the key military purpose as to why we are deploying HMS Prince of Wales is for it to achieve its full operating capability, operating alongside other carriers of our allies that are in the Indo-Pacific.”

Such are the tensions around the CSG that last week the Starmer government sent Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, the chief of the Defence Staff, to meet his counterparts in Beijing—the first such mission by Britain's senior military officer to China in 10 years.

The declared aim of the Starmer government to act as the main junior partner of US imperialism means being dragged into a maelstrom, up to and including a military confrontation with China. But this also poses massive economic shocks to the UK economy requiring the ultra-precarious balancing act pursued by Downing Street.

Despite the post-2016 souring of relations with Beijing, UK trade with China remains substantial, as are China's investments in Britain. A study by the *Financial Times* this month concluded that “unpicking decades of spending by Beijing and Chinese businesses across the British economy would be difficult”. It warned, “Spending has slowed since 2017 peak but Beijing retains significant investments across the UK... more than \$100bn of Chinese investment has flowed into the country since 2000.”

Reeves, ahead of a visit to Washington for this week's International Monetary Fund summit, was asked by the *Telegraph* if she was “willing to engage less with China to placate... Trump”. She responded, “China is the second biggest economy in the world, and it would be, I think, very foolish to not engage. That's the approach of this government.”



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