

UK to lead European “Northern Navies” force against Russia

Robert Stevens
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On April 29, First Sea Lord Sir Gwyn Jenkins announced that the Royal Navy was set to form the core of a new multinational maritime bloc of European “Northern Navies” targeting Russia. Significantly, the bloc does not include the United States.

Britain’s “hybrid” fleet would combine traditional warships with uncrewed systems, drones and AI-enabled platforms, he told the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)’s inaugural Fisher Lecture—named after Admiral Fisher, who played a critical role in the Anglo-German naval arms race prior to the First World War.

This “paradigm shift” was about “increasing the mass, survivability and lethality of our force”.

The Northern Navies would centre on the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), a UK-led grouping of 10 European countries. Founded in 2014, it comprises the United Kingdom, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

These countries span the Nordic and Baltic regions, defined by Jenkins as an “open sea border with Russia.” Canada has also expressed interest in participation.

Pointing to the war in Ukraine, and the US/Israeli war on Iran, Jenkins warned that “just maintaining the ‘capable status quo’ is simply not good enough”. The *Times*—mouthpiece of the most hawkish elements of the military—reported Jenkins saying, “The need to rearm and improve this country’s readiness for war has become an absolute necessity... We are at an inflection point.”

This followed Labour government Prime Minister Keir Starmer and military officials being dragged over the coals for cuts to the navy over the last three decades, and the fact the UK was only able to mobilise

a single destroyer during the Iran crisis—which was sent to the British base in Akrotiri, not to the Persian Gulf.

Jenkins acknowledged, “I know that recent developments in the Gulf have put the Royal Navy in the spotlight. Were we prepared enough? Can we fight today, and if so, with what? I am not here to dodge these questions. I am here to show you that we have a plan”.

This was a corrective to his remarks made a day earlier to the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, where he admitted that the navy would only be fully “ready for war by the end of this decade”—answering the question, “But are we as ready as we should be? I don’t think we are. We have work to do.”

Since the Starmer government has still not committed to funding its 10-year Strategic Defence Review—published a year ago—Jenkins was still forced to acknowledge at RUSI, “there is no scenario in which we will have unlimited resources.”

Given financial restraints, he was “determined to reduce the cost per unit and cost of production to achieve the scale we need.” Alluding to the fact that drones were responsible “for inflicting 90 per cent of the casualties” in the war in Ukraine, he added that it was necessary to introduce new technology and “end the mentality that what we need is ever more expensive and larger platforms.”

The “hybrid navy” plan is based on three core operational programmes in the North Atlantic and High North.

Atlantic Bastion would be a layered sensor network using drones, underwater vehicles and surveillance systems to detect and monitor hostile activity. This is aimed at Russian submarines. Data would be relayed in real time, enabling rapid deployment of offensive capabilities, said Jenkins.

Atlantic Shield would focus on integrated air and missile defence against drones, hypersonic weapons and ballistic threats.

The final component, Atlantic Strike, would enhance long-range strike capability, including hybrid carrier strike groups deploying both crewed aircraft and jet-powered drones.

Jenkins stated that uncrewed systems would begin patrolling the North Atlantic in 2026, uncrewed escort ships would sail alongside Royal Navy vessels within two years, and jet-powered drones would operate from aircraft carriers as early as next year.

He pointed to a recent wargame conducted by the navy at Southwick Park, on England's south coast, explaining, "Our Hybrid Navy generated a substantial increase in combat mass, as measured by weapons and sensors, while also providing added flexibility and tactical choice for commanders. Our missile capacity increased three-fold—at the level necessary to win a contest in the North Atlantic."

A significant element of the Royal Navy's planning is to draw its auxiliary fleet closer into military operations. Jenkins said, "in response to events in the Middle East, we have spent several weeks turning RFA [Royal Fleet Auxiliary] Lyme Bay, an auxiliary dock landing ship, into a mothership for autonomous and uncrewed mine hunting capabilities."

Of the Northern Navies bloc, Jenkins said it would "train, exercise and prepare together" and be "designed to fight immediately if required, with real capabilities, real war plans, and real integration."

The command structure would be based in Britain, directed from the UK's Maritime Operations Centre at Northwood in London, effectively placing Britain at the helm of a new European naval grouping, independent of the US.

While Jenkins declared that the Northern Navies would "complement NATO, rather than drawing resources away from it," the decision is a move away from the US-dominated NATO framework, reflecting mounting tensions between the White House and Europe.

JEF has historically operated in close coordination with American forces, including joint exercises such as BALTOPS in the Baltic Sea, Exercise Arrow and Lightning Strike in Finland, and various air defence drills. These included Operation Global Guardian, held

in February 2024 and coordinated with NATO's Steadfast Defender exercise.

In the latter, with "the coordination of NATO's Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) in Udem, Germany, the JEF worked with long-range strategic bombers from the United States Air Force (USAF), returning to their home base in the United States, to simulate the interception of adversary aircraft", read an press release by Allied Air Command on the NATO website.

Such close historic collaboration made the fact that Jenkins never mentioned the US in his keynote speech all the more striking.

Britain and its partners in the JEF are responding to Trump's threat to downgrade or abandon the US's NATO commitments entirely, after having denounced the main European powers as "unreliable" for their refusal to back—with their own militaries—the US onslaught on Iran.

In his repeated denunciations of the Starmer government, Trump summed up the UK's position as "we want to get involved when the war is over" and ridiculed the Royal Navy's two aircraft carriers as "toys compared to what we have."

Trump told the *Daily Telegraph* in March, "You [UK] don't even have a navy. You're too old and had aircraft carriers that didn't work."

This was in the same interview in which he declared—barely three months from the date of the next NATO summit in July—when asked by the newspaper if he would reconsider the US's NATO membership, "Oh yes, I would say [it's] beyond reconsideration. I was never swayed by NATO. I always knew they were a paper tiger, and Putin knows that too, by the way."

The Northern Navies initiative, made as Trump threatens to pull thousands of NATO troops out of Europe, is an early attempt to construct a military framework capable of operating without an increasingly hostile United States, and carrying on the conflict with Russia independently.



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