

# Mind the gap: UK aircraft carrier operations

[Content preview – Subscribe to **Jane's Defence Weekly** for full article]

The United Kingdom is poised to become a major carrier navy, with the first operational deployment looming for HMS *Queen Elizabeth*. Dr *Lee Willett* examines how the Royal Navy might tackle tasks at home when a UK carrier task group deploys – especially with risks increasing around UK waters

When the aircraft carrier HMS *Queen Elizabeth* sails in August for a four-month deployment to the US eastern seaboard to conduct first-of-class flying trials with the F-35B Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter, the UK Royal Navy (RN) will be taking a major step towards operational availability for the country's new carrier capability. Sister ship HMS *Prince of Wales* is following closely along this path, with sea trials scheduled for 2019. The UK is aiming to declare initial operating capability (maritime) (IOC[M]) for the carriers in 2020 and *Queen Elizabeth*'s first operational deployment is planned for 2021. It is anticipated that the carrier may deploy 'east of Suez'.

As the carrier programme has progressed, the number of front-line warships in the RN has reduced. When the programme formally got under way in the late 1990s, the RN fleet included 35 destroyers and frigates and 12 nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs). Today, those numbers stand at 19 and seven respectively, and maintaining these figures is a challenge as older classes are retired and new ones come online.



*The UK aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth, pictured during Exercise 'Saxon Warrior' in the North Atlantic in 2017. Queen Elizabeth and its carrier strike group (CSG) will first deploy on operations in 2021. Questions have been raised about how the UK Royal Navy will provide presence at home at a time increasing risks around UK waters. (US Navy)*

1711713

When either of the two carriers deploys on operations, a range of RN assets will also sail as part of the carrier strike group (CSG). The precise construct of the CSG on any given deployment will depend on the mission requirement and it can be operated to strategically reduce risk. Moreover, as seen with other carrier task groups around the world, there will be options to fit assets from partner navies into the UK CSG. Allies appear keen to send ships to deploy with the CSG and such partner presence would help alleviate the operational burden on the RN at a time when its front-line surface and subsurface asset coverage across national and international interests is extremely stretched.

The need to protect the carrier – to enable it to do its job, and because of its strategic value to the United Kingdom – mandates the deployment of a robust task group with it. Although not commenting on precise CSG constructs, an RN spokesperson told *Jane's* the carrier “will be robustly protected by air and sea assets when it deploys, and we are creating other new capabilities like the Type 26 frigates and P-8 [maritime] patrol aircraft”.

However, a nominal CSG construct – designed to protect the carrier and its air wing as the core capabilities – may well include one or two Type 45 air-defence destroyers, a towed array sonar-capable Type 23 or Type 26 frigate, one or two Astute-class SSNs, a Tide-class tanker, and a Future Solid Support ammunition and dry cargo ship. Although some of these CSG berths could be filled by allied assets, generating enough platforms and personnel to fill such a task group from a naval force structure that is much smaller than when the carrier plans were conceived is going to be a challenge.

However, the RN is robust in its view that it will meet this challenge, although the challenge also comes at a time when threats to UK interests in and around home waters have increased. When the UK's carrier programme was conceived – and during a large part of its gestation – UK strategic focus for its maritime forces had been on power projection at distance. Plans to project such power at distance did not have to consider a significant military threat to UK national interests in and around home waters. The reality is that the growth of Russian naval activity in Europe in recent years has changed the nature of the game.

### **Russian risk**

Although much Western political focus has centred on Russian military intervention in Georgia, its annexation of Crimea, and its involvement in the crises in Syria and eastern Ukraine, also of significant concern in the West is Russian naval activity and the increase in Russian naval capability and presence.

In political terms, activity involving transits to and from the Mediterranean Sea by Russia's sole aircraft carrier, the Project 1143.5/6 Orel-class ship *Admiral Kuznetsov*, has been a primary part of the focus. Such transits began in earnest in 2008 and built to a political crescendo in late 2016 when the carrier sailed through the North Sea on the way to conducting combat operations off Syria, before returning home for maintenance.

In naval operational terms, the activities of Russian surface ships, submarines, and other assets such as intelligence-gathering platforms have been more significant. On and below the surface, Russia is introducing new platforms with new capabilities and much has been made of the addition of Kalibr land-attack and anti-ship sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs) to its surface ships and submarines. Not only have such platforms already fired land-attack Kalibrs in combat operations

over Syria, but NATO officials have pointed to how the Kalibr capability at sea creates a 360° threat axis for Western navies.

As reported by *Jane's* in May, Russian President Vladimir Putin recently informed senior military and industrial officials that a top priority is to increase the navy's strike capabilities by introducing more Kalibr-capable surface combatants.

Turning to general surface activity, the UK has noted the increased Russian presence around its waters in recent years. This was confirmed by UK Secretary of State for Defence Gavin Williamson during a speech to the Royal United Services Institute's (RUSI's) sea power conference in May. Alongside pointing to Russian submarine activity increasing "10-fold in the North Atlantic", he highlighted the number of occasions that RN surface ships were activated in response to Russian ships approaching UK territorial waters, "In 2010, the Royal Navy had to respond once .... Last year, we had to respond 33 times."

**[Continued in full version...]**

(924 of 2535 words)

For the full version and more content:

### Jane's Defence Industry and Markets Intelligence Centre

*This analysis is taken from [Jane's Defence Industry & Markets Intelligence Centre](#), which provides world-leading analysis of commercial, industrial and technological defence developments, budget and programme forecasts, and insight into new and emerging defence markets around the world.*

*Jane's defence industry and markets news and analysis is also available within **Jane's Defence Weekly**. To learn more and to subscribe to **Jane's Defence Weekly** online, offline or print visit <http://magazines.ihs.com/>*

For advertising solutions visit [Jane's Advertising](#)