



Christen a Carrier Strike Group

by Michael John Williams

Using the HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and HMS *Prince of Wales* as its backbone, a NATO carrier strike group is an opportunity for high-end interoperability under European leadership.

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Long before the coronavirus battered European economies, NATO's European allies were finding it difficult to produce the cash or the political will to spend 2 percent of their GDP on defense. Now, with the COVID-19 pandemic straining government budgets, defense spending is likely to be on the chopping block. This will have serious implications for transatlantic security. Even as budgets shrink, security challenges will remain. China has shown an increasing willingness to intimidate democracies, while Russia remains a spoiler in Europe and the Middle East. Financial calamity does not mean that European cooperation within NATO should take a step back. In fact, now is the perfect time for European militaries to work together and no better opportunity exists than to use HMS *Queen Elizabeth* and HMS *Prince of Wales* as hubs for a NATO carrier strike group (CSG). A NATO CSG would be a powerful symbol of Alliance unity and would bolster the Alliance's force posture and interoperability.

Return of the Carriers

For the better part of the last two centuries, the Royal Navy (RN) was the world's most potent fighting force with a peak power of 332 warships. Today, the United Kingdom's Ministry of Defence estimates only thirty ships are fit for service. For the first time since the decommissioning of the HMS *Ark Royal* in 2011, the RN once again has an aircraft carrier back in service—the 65,000-ton HMS *Queen Elizabeth* (R08). Her sister ship, the HMS *Prince of Wales*, is now in sea trials. These ships are *highly automated and extremely advanced*, needing a core crew of only 800 due to automation, and capable of deploying up to thirty-six F-35B Lightning II Joint Strike Fighters. One immediate challenge for the RN is that the UK buy rate for the F-35Bs is such that it will take until 2024 to get to just twenty-four British F-35Bs on the decks of the carriers. Furthermore, it will not be possible for the UK to operate both vessels simultaneously due to staffing shortfalls.

It has long been rumored that the UK plans for the carriers to serve as part of a combined CSG with the United States. Such plans would build on cooperation

stretching back a century, including on naval nuclear issues that are a critical feature of the US-UK “special relationship.” A report from an RN-US Navy study group, *Combined Seapower: A Shared Vision for Royal Navy-US Navy Cooperation*, highlighted shared strategic goals and outlined future avenues of cooperation. In 2018, after completing her sea trials, HMS *Queen Elizabeth* promptly steamed westward to the United States and also took part in exercises in the United States in 2019 in order to advance true integration. When HMS *Queen Elizabeth* goes on her first deployment to Asia in 2021, her twelve British F-35Bs will be joined by a squadron of US Marine Corps F-35Bs flown by US pilots, giving the carrier a more robust complement of combat aircraft. Beyond a lack of combat aircraft, the RN also doesn't really have the ships, billets, or personnel to complement a full-scale CSG on near continuous deployment.

The RN's Westlant 19 exercise in 2019 consisted of HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, flanked by the air defense destroyer HMS *Dragon*, the anti-submarine frigate HMS *Northumberland*, and the fleet tanker RFA *Tideforce*. For her 2021 deployment, the RN plans to deploy HMS *Queen Elizabeth* with additional escorts: two Type 45 destroyers, two Type 23 frigates, a nuclear submarine, plus a tanker and fleet supply ship. In the long term, the RN cannot continue to deploy a full CSG without negatively impacting other commitments. The RN only has six destroyers, thirteen frigates, and six fast-attack submarines. However, due to refit and repair, the number of deployable vessels at any one time is about 66 percent of the total—give or take twelve vessels available. The solution is to not just advance interoperability with the United States, but to include European NATO allies as well.

Britannia and Europa, Hand in Hand

It is entirely reasonable that the first mission for the UK's first-ever CSG be a sovereign endeavor (although the presence of US F-35s qualifies sovereign to some degree), but going forward, pride should take a back seat to capability, effectiveness, and enhanced NATO

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The HMS Queen Elizabeth Aircraft Carrier (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



interoperability. Bilateral naval cooperation between the United States and the UK is a step in the right direction, which will account for not just UK budget constraints. The US Navy's plan for 435 ships is also a pipe dream, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and an increasing awareness in the United States about the cost of militarization. Cooperation with European allies is necessary and would also allow a post-Brexit UK to resume its highly valuable role as a bridge between the Continent and the United States. Utilizing the British carriers with a European supported task force would seriously bolster the capability of the entire Alliance. Such a move should be compatible with the UK's strategic goals and will enhance the Global Britain concept, whilst advancing NATO cohesion and relations with the United States.

As then British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson argued in 2016, although the UK was leaving the European Union, it was not leaving Europe. Brexit was not, according to Johnson, "any kind of mandate for the country to turn in on itself, to haul up the drawbridge to detach itself from the international community." The UK has also consistently maintained that NATO is the preferred forum for European security issues and establishing a NATO CSG comprised mostly of European contributions would be a major leap forward for the Alliance. It would allow the United States to reposition forces and would grant the UK and European NATO allies a truly

global reach. Creating a UK-led NATO-Europe CSG would be relatively easy functionally and builds on training exercises such as Brilliant Mariner, Poseidon, Joint Warrior, Dynamic Mongoose, and Formidable Shield. Furthermore, the UK and France have been ramping up military cooperation since signing the 2010 Lancaster House Treaties, and cooperation through a CSG would build on the maritime cooperation exhibited in the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF).

Collectively, the naval capabilities of Europe are immense and hard to ignore during NATO exercises. The challenge to increased joint capability remains the friction between national and multinational commitments, which will be exacerbated as a result of the pandemic in an era of constrained national budgets. It would behoove all involved to accept the reality that working together is the best way forward. Forming a NATO-Europe CSG is a major way to advance collective action within NATO, demonstrate European solidarity on defense capabilities to Washington, and utilize limited resources most effectively for power projection globally. Such solidarity is necessary in a world in which China will outstrip the US Navy in the coming decades. European allies cannot simply depend on the United States—they must contribute actively to global security.

The navies of Europe have some excellent force options to support HMS *Queen Elizabeth* with air, surface, and

subsurface defense. The Danish Iver Huitfeldt-class frigate *Peter Willemoes* passed the British Flag Officer Sea Training test in 2015 and the Iver Huitfeldt class is the basis for the forthcoming Arrowhead 140 Type 31 frigate that the UK will begin building shortly. The Dutch De Zeven Provinciën-class frigates are also up to the task with a highly advanced weapons and sensor suite. Optimized for air defense, these ships can also serve in an anti-submarine and anti-surface combatant capacity. The Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen-class frigates, the French La Fayette-class frigates, and the Álvaro de Bazán-class frigates of the Spanish Navy can also serve in the same role. The Italian and French Horizon-class destroyer, designed with the intent of carrier escort, is another, lighter escort option. Germany is, for a number of reasons, perhaps a more difficult partner, but its F124 Sachsen-class frigate could handily fill the role of the destroyer escort. And, of course, just because it is a predominately European CSG doesn't mean that, in addition to US Marine Corps F-35s aboard the RN vessel, the strike group cannot incorporate US vessels such as Virginia-class fast-attack submarines for subsurface escort.

From Theory to Practice: Command and Control Issues

Overcoming command and control (C2) issues will be critical. Cooperation amongst European navies is not new. The French carrier *Charles de Gaulle* has utilized Spanish, Italian, Danish, and German frigates as part of its CSG. But this is on a sovereign basis, meaning that control of the asset remains with the home country. In 2019, a Spanish frigate was recalled from the French CSG mid-mission from the Indian Ocean because Madrid needed the ship elsewhere. Such arrangements won't work if NATO is to develop a credible carrier strike force capability. This NATO CSG would be a one-star command with a dual-hatted Commander United Kingdom Carrier Strike Group. This could be nestled in the existing Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM)

and Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO (STRIKFORNATO) concepts with a UK Marine Forces Command (UKMARCOMFOR) functioning as the NATO CSG Task Group (TG) commander. This commander would report to either the Joint Force Commander (JFC) or MARCOM and then the JFC. Given that the carriers are British assets, this new group would be based at Portsmouth with allied contributions forming the task force there.

Conclusion

NATO's European allies are capable of continuously deploying a UK-led NATO CSG, but given the requirement to abandon sovereign lines of responsibility, the most critical challenge is political will. For many years, interoperability in Europe has occurred in smaller regional groupings. The UK, in particular, has focused on close cooperation with Denmark, the Baltic states, and on some issues with the Netherlands. It would be logical for the first deployment of a UK-led NATO CSG to involve these partners and then expand with subsequent deployments. The reality is that the United States will not be able to match emergent peer competitors alone. Strong European capabilities are necessary both to ensure stability, but also to stave off isolationist tendencies in Washington and combat the sentiment that the United States carries too much of the burden of transatlantic defense. A UK-led NATO CSG would deal a serious blow to the argument that Europe fails to substantially contribute to NATO capabilities. A UK-led NATO CSG would serve as an example for future CSGs centered on the French carrier *Charles de Gaulle* and the Italian carrier *Giuseppe Garibaldi*. Flying NATO's flag and integrating HMS *Queen Elizabeth* into F-35 operations would also help other European allies equipped with F-35Bs or F-35Cs (currently only Italy) integrate into the project, in addition to supporting other UK-led defense efforts such as the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and the CJEF. Such integration would be a serious step forward for allied defense cooperation in NATO.

Michael John Williams is an associate professor of international affairs and director of international relations at the Maxwell School for Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. He is also a nonresident senior fellow in the Atlantic Council's Transatlantic Security Initiative, in the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security.

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