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The Brits Are Coming: Can They Sustain It?

By Geoffrey Till

SYNOPSIS

The recent long-awaited announcement confirmed the imminent despatch of a British carrier task force to the Indo-Pacific as part of a new "Global Britain" brand post-Brexit. Its intended size and strength have surprised many, but many issues remain to be clarified.

COMMENTARY

FOR SEVERAL years, the British government has been making clear their intention to tilt towards the Indo-Pacific region as part of the new 'Global Britain' brand in the wake of Brexit. This intention has now been underlined by a detailed official announcement from the ministry of defence in London that a carrier task force centred on HMS *Queen Elizabeth* will shortly be despatched for a visit to the region.

The carrier strike group will comprise, among others, two Type 45 Air Defence destroyers, two Type 23 anti-submarine frigates, and two Royal Fleet Auxiliary support vessels. It is understood that an Astute class nuclear propelled submarine will accompany the strike group. Non-British participants in the group include the Dutch frigate HMNLS *Evertsen* and the American destroyer USS *The Sullivans*, together with a contingent of ten US Marine Corps F35B aircraft.

An Indo-Pacific Presence Post-Brexit?

The plan is for the strike group to visit more than 40 countries, including India, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore. Highlights are expected to be exercises in the Mediterranean with the French carrier *Charles de Gaulle*. This is intended to convey Britain's continuing interest in the Mediterranean and the Gulf, and a determination to maintain close defence links with mainland Europe despite Brexit and its Pacific tilt.

Another highlight will be heavy engagement with India, which is likewise re-invigorating and expanding its carrier forces. There is developing interest in some degree of British association with the Quad group of countries and a very keen British desire for a free trade deal between the two countries, in the wake of its departure from the European Union.

In Southeast Asia the group will participate in the Exercise *Bersama Lima* with Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Singapore to mark the 50th anniversary of the Five Powers Defence Arrangement (FPDA). The group will sail through the South China Sea on its way to North East Asia for visits to South Korea and Japan. The group is not apparently intending to sail through the Taiwan strait, to the disappointment of some.

The fact that both Japan and South Korea are in the early stages of developing carrier capabilities will guarantee strong professional interest in the visits. Moreover, Japan with its new amphibious forces is very interested in the well-regarded UK style of amphibious operation, as was evident from Tokyo's interest in the visit of HMS *Albion* a couple of years ago.

In the course of the deployment the group is likely to disaggregate so that individual units can operate individual deployments in support of the overall mission. Australia with its acquisition of a frigate design based on the new British Type 26 frigate is likely to be a major part of such programmes, and New Zealand too.

Pan-European FONOPs?

Other European nations have also signalled much the same intent, if not necessarily the same scale. The French have always seen themselves as significant players in the Indo-Pacific as have the Dutch who will be a formal part of the carrier strike group. Germany and Italy have also confirmed their intention to send naval assets to the area. It would be surprising if effort were not made to exploit opportunities for further European defence cooperation out-of-area.

The British government has endeavoured to show that this is not intended as an anti-China cruise, but with its stated aim of exercising, and so confirming, the principle of freedom of navigation; the deployment is unlikely to be welcome in Beijing. British criticism of Beijing's actions in Hong Kong and the recent House of Commons vote accusing China of 'genocide' in Xinjiang will not help.

Nonetheless, the British wish to maintain economic links with China and are fully aware of local sensitivities about great power competition and so will seek to avoid undue provocation.

London has also been keen to show that this deployment is only the start of a new beginning. The Royal Navy's second carrier HMS *Prince of Wales* is still largely expected to be the central unit of a littoral strike group intended to operate closer to land in situations short of high-intensity conflict.

The government has also announced its intention to form much smaller littoral groups of frigates and offshore patrol vessels that will be the mainstay of a persistent if not

permanent presence in the area, working with local forces and operating from 'places not bases' throughout the Indo-Pacific.

Surprising Scale and Ambition

The scale of the deployment and of the ambition behind it has surprised some observers given the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the British economy. Moreover, despite the extraordinary success (so far) of the UK's vaccine roll-out programme, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government faces a host of domestic difficulties.

Some of these can be thought so serious as to even raise doubts about the viability of the United Kingdom to survive long-term. That apart, this carrier deployment is a major effort for a navy now reduced to just 19 frigates and destroyers. Against this the defence ministry clearly thinks the effort both doable and worth the effort.

The Royal Navy emerged comparatively well from the recent [integrated defence and security review process](#) with three confirmed fleet recapitalisation programmes for new frigates and other combatants. This aside, there is a renewal of the Successor/Dreadnought ballistic missile firing submarine force, which seems to be going well.

The naval horizon, at any rate, seems relatively clear of storm clouds but in this world of pandemic and bewildering technological, economic and political change, nothing perhaps should be taken for granted.

Geoffrey Till is Professor and Adviser to the Maritime Security Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg