

Global Britain Programme – The Carrier Strike Group 2021: The Maritime Component of Global Britain

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Introduction

Just three days after the Brexit transition period came to an end on 1 January 2021, the Royal Navy's Carrier Strike Group 2021 (CSG21) deployment reached a significant milestone itself; it had reached Initial Operating Capability (IOC). This status denotes that all elements of the group, from fighter jets to radar systems to anti-ship weapons, have been successfully brought together and operated.¹ It followed the successful North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Joint Warrior Exercises held last autumn, in which the UK-led multinational deployment focussed on incorporating all

elements of the Carrier Strike Group (CSG) with 13 of the UK's allies, including Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Turkey, Japan, UAE and the US. Furthermore, Exercise Joint Warrior saw the largest number of aircraft on a British Royal Navy carrier since 1983, as well as the most F-35B jets at sea across the globe.

The vessels will now undergo final preparation checks and maintenance, as they prepare for their last exercise as a group, Exercise 'Strike Warrior',² taking place off the west Hebrides

¹ 'Carrier Strike Group hits important milestone', *UK Government*, 4 January 2021, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/carrier-strike-group-hits-important-milestone>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

² Allison, G., 'British flagship 'getting sea legs back'', *The UK Defence Journal*, 4 March 2021, available at: <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/british-flagship-getting-sea-legs-back/>, last visited: 5 March 2021.

range in May 2021, before departing Portsmouth to embark upon its maiden operational deployment in the weeks after. The first likely stop will be to conduct exercises with NATO partners in the Mediterranean, before heading east of Suez. Charting the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, and Pacific Ocean, this deployment, the largest of any European naval power in 20 years, should be framed within the appropriate analytical frameworks for broader clarity of what precisely this deployment represents.

Two frameworks for analysis regarding CSG21 will be presented. The first framework is the ability for the UK to harness partnerships with global allies in achieving its strategic intent. While many observers proclaim that this marks the triumphant return of the Royal Navy to the global stage,³ there remain more nuanced and strategically significant considerations

that allow for a deeper understanding of this historic event. The second analytical framework for understanding CSG21 is the deployment's role within the UK government's Global Britain strategy. Here, issues will be addressed which policy planners need to consider, including; future CSG costs, burden sharing with international allies and partners, logistical resupply, and future basing rights, and port facilities. The UK's future ability to engage with its Canada, Australia and New Zealand (CANZUK) allies and its Five Power Defence Agreement (FPDA) partners will highlight important sustainment considerations for future maritime deployments to the Indo-Pacific. The UK MOD and FCDO should act to resolve these issues as a matter of priority if the Royal Navy is to maintain a 'persistent' presence in the Indo-Pacific as stated.⁴

Strategic Context: From Warfighting to Operating

During the first two decades of this century the Royal Navy was in the operational, and thus strategic,

shadow of the British Army, conducting costly counter-insurgencies on two fronts in Iraq and Afghanistan. These demanded substantial political and financial investment and therefore dominated the strategic thinking space in

³ Lundquist, E., 'Royal Navy Ready to Deploy a Carrier Strike Group for First Time in a Generation', *Sea Power*, available at: <https://seapowermagazine.org/royal-navy-ready-to-deploy-a-carrier-strike-group-for-first-time-in-a-generation/>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

⁴ Vice-Admiral Jerry Kyd stated that the Royal Navy's "ambition is to be absolutely persistent and forward-based there, maybe with a carrier strike group", in; Fisher, L., 'Britain set to confront China with new aircraft carrier', *The Times*, available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/britain-set-to-confront-china-with-new-aircraft-carrier-v2gnwrr88>, last visited: 6 February 2021.

defence. The 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), however, highlighted the need for a future carrier strike capability, giving the UK the ability to project military power more than 700 nautical miles over land and sea from anywhere in the world. The document stated: “This capability will give the UK long term political flexibility to act without depending, at times of regional tension, on agreement from other countries to use of their bases for any mission we want to undertake”.⁵ Rightly styled as a ‘defence asset’, the aircraft carriers afford enormous strategic depth,⁶ providing guaranteed jet access with a flexible and highly mobile runway able to operate anywhere in the world at immediate notice.

While there has been much misleading and inaccurate media speculation regarding CSG21, particularly concerning an unfounded lack of fixed wing capability,⁷ its deployment for spring 2021 is on schedule after reaching IOC in early January. It reached this milestone immediately

following two significant announcements at the end of 2020. Both of these announcements will contribute to shaping the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Foreign Policy and Development (IR), which was announced just prior to the CSG leaving Portsmouth harbour.

The first announcement was delivered by the Prime Minister and concerns an increase in defence spending of £16.5bn over the next four-year period, the largest investment made in defence over the last 30 years.⁸ The Royal Navy were the big winners of this spending review; set to acquire eight new Type 26 frigates, five Type 31s, the next generation Type 32 frigate, new Fleet Solid Support Ships, and a new multi-role research vessel. The building of these new frigates will safeguard thousands of existing manufacturing jobs as well as create thousands of new positions in BAE Systems’ yards on the River Clyde.⁹ This is part of the Prime Minister’s intent to “restore Britain’s position as the foremost naval power in Europe”.¹⁰ These new frigates, providing crucial

⁵ ‘Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review’, *UK Government*, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/62482/strategic-defence-security-review.pdf p.22, last visited: 8 February 2021.

⁶ Lye, H., ‘The carrier strike equation: Do the UK’s plans add up?’, *Naval Technology*, available at: <https://www.naval-technology.com/features/the-carrier-strike-equation-do-the-uks-plans-add-up/>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

⁷ Allison G., ‘The myths surrounding Britain’s new aircraft carriers’, *UK Defence Journal*, 21 October 2020, available at: <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/the-myths-surrounding-britains-new-aircraft-carriers/>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

⁸ ‘Defence secures largest investment since the cold war’, *UK Government*, 19 November 2020, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-secures-largest-investment-since-the-cold-war>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

⁹ Clark, R., ‘What the extra defence spending means and where it will go’, *UK Defence Journal*, 20 November 2020, available at: <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/what-the-extra-defence-spending-means-and-where-it-will-go/>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

¹⁰ ‘Integrated Review Volume 684’, *Hansard*, 19 November 2020, available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2020-11-19/debates/CA347B2B-EE02-40DF-B5CE-1E8FAA07139E/IntegratedReview>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

anti-submarine capability, will help to sustain future CSG deployments.

The second important IR and naval-related announcement was the CDS General Sir Nick Carter's speech on 30 September 2020. General Carter discussed the new Integrated Operation Concept (IOPC), which will help form and shape defence's impact on the IR, and with it, UK maritime policy for the next 20 years. Within those parts of the IOPC relevant to maritime policy and future CSG deployments, a clear distinction is made between 'operating' and 'warfighting'. While the military needs to retain efficiency and lethality in warfighting, international competitors are increasingly seeking to challenge the UK in political warfare, often fought below the accepted western threshold for what defines a conflict.

Geopolitics is not new, but due to an under-investment in strategic doctrine, the UK Armed Forces is now required to maintain an increased and continuous below-threshold competitive campaign posture against rival states. This will allow the UK to be more proactive than reactive and represents a significant development compared to previous SDSRs, which called for increased capability to combat identified threats. By contrast, the IOPC envisions defence as a proactive tool of deterrence by utilising a more forward deployed military presence –

the 'operating' side to the IOPC. Operating in this way entails increased capacity building and engagement with allies and partners against common threats, placing a premium on alliances and interoperability.

Both the Prime Minister's announced defence spending review and the CDS' IOPC doctrine ultimately serve to place defence at the centre of a strategic realignment and consideration of the UK's place in the international environment. It is with the two distinct yet interlinked concepts described above – the Royal Navy as an integral component to Britain's more forward deployed military presence, and the crystallisation of an increasingly competitive geostrategic environment – that the CSG21 deployment is framed within a strategic context. The IR will solidify this, and serves to highlight the changing geostrategic requirements of UK foreign, defence, security and development policy, in order to better meet the challenges of tomorrow.

Framework One: Operating with Global Allies

Understanding how this development in military thinking will impact UK maritime policy requires an analytical approach sensitive to the priorities of the IOpC and the UK's Global Britain strategy. As such, the first framework for analysis applied here relates back to the overarching centrality of 'operating' to the IOpC, where 'operating' – the need for a more forward deployed military presence to act as a deterrent – is achieved conceptually through increased capacity building and engagement with allies and partners against common threats.

A UK-led, NATO-supported, international force is an achievement not just of the Royal Navy, but also of the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Whitehall more broadly. Indeed, the UK's partnerships with NATO and international allies, some of whom will provide crucial personnel, equipment, and logistical support throughout, are an important British strategic framework behind the deployment of CSG21. This international support represents one of British defence's most resolute strengths; that the nation operates most effectively with

like-minded global partners and allies, across all military domains. The UK has seldom operated unilaterally,¹¹ and indeed the future of warfare will be characterised, as it has throughout recent British military history, by working alongside global allies. This is strongly reflected by the CDS' IOpC doctrine which places operating with allied partners at the forefront of an increased global military presence, as seen with the UK-US maritime relationship. However, it also allows for the development of a more collaborative form of NATO engagement with the UK CSG deployments in the Mediterranean, one that will rise to the security challenges posed in the region by the Russian Navy.

The UK-US military relationship remains as strong as ever, with various joint global commitments and military cooperation ranging from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, to Poland and the Baltic states, to defence engagement in Africa. Recently this relationship has been bolstered further still by the UK-US Joint Declaration for the CSG21 deployment.¹² Support from the US Navy and the United States Marine Corps (USMC) includes a detachment of USMC F-35B Lightning II aircraft

¹¹ A common example is the Falklands War. However, even here the UK had essential ISR support from the US. See Brustolin, V., de Oliveira, D. and dos Reis Peron, A.E., 2020, 'Exploring the relationship between crypto AG and the CIA in the use of rigged encryption machines for espionage in Brazil', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, p.14.

¹² 'Joint Statement on Carrier Strike Group 2021 Joint Declaration Signing', UK Government, 19 January 2021, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-on-carrier-strike-group-2021-joint-declaration-signing--2>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

and the US Navy's destroyer, USS The Sullivans - an Arleigh Burke-class Aegis guided missile destroyer. Ten USMC F-35Bs undertook training on the HMS Queen Elizabeth in addition to the five from the RAF last September, though the figure supplied for CSG21 is so far undisclosed.

The Queen Elizabeth-class carriers will be deployed with up to two operational Lightning squadrons and 24 F-35Bs on board, with a maximum capacity for 36. Both the USMC and the RAF operate the identical 'B' variant of the F-35 (short take-off/vertical landing), allowing both nations' jets to operate seamlessly off one another's flight decks - as Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 211 (VMFA-211) did aboard HMS Queen Elizabeth last autumn.¹³ Conducting air-to-surface and air-to-air missions, in addition to crucial Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, its 800km range ensures that the 24 F-35Bs will provide a formidable strike capability and deterrent for the CSG should they be required.¹⁴

Named in honour of the five Sullivan brothers who lost their lives when the USS Juneau was sunk by the Japanese during the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal, the USS The Sullivans will join the Royal Navy Type 45 Destroyers and Type 23 Frigates providing protection of the CSG from air-borne, sea-launched, and below-sea threats. The USS The Sullivans can be fitted with the RIM-67 surface-to-air missile platform providing stand-off protection up to 185km away, Tomahawk cruise missiles, and anti-submarine missiles.¹⁵ It will join the HMS Diamond and Defender in the air defence role,¹⁶ in addition to anti-submarine warfare alongside HMS Kent and Richard.¹⁷

Like the USMC F-35Bs, the USS The Sullivans has already worked alongside HMS Queen Elizabeth, exercising in the North Sea during Exercise Joint Warrior last autumn. Highlighting the UK-US military relationship, the US Department of Defence affirmed that "(t)his deployment underscores the strength of our bilateral ties and demonstrates US-UK interoperability, both of which are key tenets of the US National

¹³ 'US commits to HMS Queen Elizabeth's maiden deployment', Royal Navy, 20 January 2021, available at: <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2021/january/20/20210120-csg-usa>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

¹⁴ 'About the F-35 Lightning', Royal Air Force, available at: <https://www.raf.mod.uk/aircraft/lightning-f35b/>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

¹⁵ 'Arleigh Burke class Guided Missile Destroyer - DDG', Sea Forces, available at:

<http://www.seaforces.org/usnships/ddg/Arleigh-Burke-class.htm>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

¹⁶ 'HMS Diamond (D34)', Royal Navy, available at: <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/our-organisation/the-fighting-arms/surface-fleet/destroyers/hms-diamond>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

¹⁷ 'HMS Northumberland (F238)', Royal Navy, available at: <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/our-organisation/the-fighting-arms/surface-fleet/frigates/type-23/hms-northumberland>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

Defense Strategy”.¹⁸ Similarly the UK Defence Secretary announced; “This deployment embodies the strength of our bilateral ties and reflects the depth and breadth of this vital defence and security partnership”.¹⁹ Thus, a relatively small US contingent of a destroyer and a detachment of F-35Bs the CSG capability can be augmented significantly through the UK’s ability to operate with key allies. Additionally, burden-sharing with partnered nations helps reduce costs to the UK for such a large deployment, enabling the Royal Navy to meet its other global commitments without reducing operational bandwidth.

The Royal Navy’s ability to seamlessly operate with both the US Navy and the USMC led to a Statement of Intent (SOI) for Future Integrated Warfighting between the two naval forces in 2020.²⁰ In effect for the next ten years, the SOI incorporates a vision for inter-changeability between the two navies, synchronises pioneering capabilities, strengthens operating concepts, and focusses collective efforts to deliver combined maritime power. The U.S.

Navy’s Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Mike Gilday stressed that; “By organizing our cooperation on carrier strike, underwater superiority, navy and marine integration and doubling down on future war fighting like unmanned and artificial intelligence, we will remain on the leading edge of great power competition.” The First Sea Lord Admiral Radakin reaffirmed that in “*an increasingly contested world, alliances and partnerships such as that between the U.K. and the U.S. are vital.*”²¹ The SOI was announced in the following month to the CDS’ speech regarding the IOpC. This was an immediate demonstration of the IOpC’s impact on UK maritime policy for the coming decade. The UK-US Joint Declaration for the CSG21 deployment, formally established two months after the SOI, is the first practical policy demonstration for the CDS’ IOpC – and a strong indicator of UK maritime strategy for the next ten years.

There remains much underdeveloped conceptual work in this space, however. While the UK-US Joint

¹⁸ Reim, G., ‘US Marine Corps commits detachment of F-35Bs to HMS Queen Elizabeth’, *Flight Global*, 21 January 2021, available at: <https://www.flightglobal.com/fixed-wing/us-marine-corps-commits-detachment-of-f-35bs-to-hms-queen-elizabeth/142052.article>, last visited: 8 February 2021

¹⁹ ‘Joint Statement on Carrier Strike Group 2021 Joint Declaration Signing’, *UK Government*, 19 January 2021, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-on-carrier-strike-group-2021-joint-declaration-signing--2>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

²⁰ ‘Statement of Intent by the Royal Navy of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern

Ireland and the United States of America regarding Future Integrated Warfighting’, *Royal Navy*, 21 October 2020, available at: https://media.defense.gov/2020/Oct/21/2002521149/-1/-1/0/STATEMENT%20OF%20INTENT_OCT%2021%202020.PDF/STATEMENT%20OF%20INTENT_OCT%2021%202020.PDF, last visited: 8 February 2021.

²¹ Dunlop, T., ‘US, Royal Navy sign agreement on ‘Integrated Warfighting’, *UK Defence Journal*, 23 October 2020, available at: <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/us-royal-navy-sign-agreement-on-integrated-warfighting/> last visited: 8 February 2021.

Declaration paves the way for future collaborative maritime deployments, there is room for improvement in operations with other partner naval forces. In particular, the exercises due to take place in the Mediterranean during the first phase of the CSG21 deployment with NATO allies should incorporate a common doctrinal framework, and appropriate force posture, so as to meet the challenges posed by an increasingly assertive Russian Navy. In recent years, the Russian Navy 5th Operational Squadron has launched the *Kilo* class stealth submarines from their bases inside the Black Sea, and they often pass undetected through the Bosphorus and into the Mediterranean on the way to Syria, Libya, and the Atlantic.²²

The act of crossing the Bosphorus is in direct breach of the Montreux Convention,²³ according to which, Russian submarines must register their transit with Turkey, a NATO ally and eastern Mediterranean power, unless they are crossing for essential maintenance or the delivery of new crafts. The increased deployment of these cruise-missile-carrying Russian submarines across southern Europe is

a serious concern for NATO's leadership. Speaking in 2020, Admiral James Foggo, then Commander of US Naval Forces in Europe and Africa, described the Eastern Mediterranean as "one of the most kinetic areas in the world"²⁴ – referring to the pervasive presence of Russian submarines. NATO needs to develop the capability to deter this illegal Russian submarine activity in the eastern Mediterranean. By shaping and subsequently coordinating this policy from the CSG21 deployment, NATO allies can achieve greater strategic effect in this crucial area for European security. In so doing, they will assist in the collective burden-sharing which all too often rests on the UK and the US. Seeking a common doctrinal framework for submarine warfare and an appropriate force posture to meet this growing threat would further set the conditions for future UK CSG deployments heading into the Mediterranean. Ensuring a secure Europe is of paramount concern for the British national interest, and encouraging NATO partners to engage more in this sphere will aid significantly to that effect.

²² Sutton, H., 'Russian Submarine Transits Bosphorus In Move That Raises Questions Under International Treaty', *Forbes*, 23 June 2020, available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/06/23/image-shows-russian-submarine-appearing-to-break-international-treaty/?sh=454af73557b8>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

²³ '1936 CONVENTION REGARDING THE REGIME OF THE STRAITS', *CIL*, available at: [https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-](https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/formidable/18/1936-Convention-Regarding-the-Regime-of-the-Straits.pdf)

[content/uploads/formidable/18/1936-Convention-Regarding-the-Regime-of-the-Straits.pdf](https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/formidable/18/1936-Convention-Regarding-the-Regime-of-the-Straits.pdf), last visited: accessed 8 February 2021.

²⁴ Foggo, J., 'One decade, two continents: a discussion with the Commander of US Naval Forces Europe-Africa', *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, 25 June 2020, available at <https://www.iiss.org/events/2020/06/discussion-commander-us-naval-forces-europe-africa>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

Framework Two: The Role of the UK Armed Forces in Global Britain

The second analytical framework places the CSG21 deployment within the context of the UK government's Global Britain strategy. The spring IR will seek to consolidate and integrate Whitehall's approach to the UK's foreign, security, defence and development policies, adapting to the changing geopolitical environment. This is a simultaneously aspirational and *realpolitik* post-Brexit foreign policy agenda, with the aim of enhancing the UK's global position. Aspirational for its global scope and seeking a new role on the world stage post-Brexit, and *realpolitik* for its ability to identify with the changing geopolitical climate across several domains, including threats from peer and near-peer state competitors to the UK's national interests.²⁵ Simply put, there are three pillars to the Global Britain strategy: ensuring a secure and prosperous Europe; the UK as an even stronger force for good on the global stage; and seeking new and

ambitious trading agreements, with the UK as a champion of free and open trade.²⁶ While each of these pillars are interconnected, the first two specifically relate to the use of the UK Armed Forces for achieving strategic intent (the overall Global Britain strategy).

The foundation for a successful Global Britain relies first and foremost upon the first pillar; ensuring a secure and prosperous Europe. The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, signed at the close of 2020, provides a significant foundation in this process.²⁷ As Europe's foremost military power,²⁸ the UK has a responsibility to contribute to the security of our continent, ensuring the maintenance of international trade and freedom of travel for global shipping lanes in particular. The UK's national interest in a secure and prosperous Europe is reinforced by the fact that approximately 40% of European imports are from Asia, which in turn accounts for approximately 28% of European exports.²⁹ Global shipping lanes in the

²⁵ 'Written Evidence – Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FPW0027)', *UK Parliament*, 28 February 2018, available at: <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/international-relations-committee/foreign-policy-in-changed-world-conditions/written/79900.html>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

²⁶ 'Global Britain', *House of Commons Library*, 6 January 2021, available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2021-0002/>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

²⁷ 'Agreements reached between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the European Union', *UK Government*, 24 December 2020, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agreements-reached-between-the-united-kingdom-of-great-britain-and-northern-ireland-and-the-european-union>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

²⁸ With the additional £16.5bn announced over four years from the autumn spending review the UK will spend annually more than both Germany and France on defence.

²⁹ 'Extra-EU Trade in Goods', *Eurostat*, 22 January 2021, (Figures for 2019 EU [including UK]), available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Extra->

Indo-Pacific, where 40% of European imports must traverse, are fraught with challenges. Not least there are many maritime bottle-necks and choke-points across the region; 100,000 vessels, or approximately one quarter of global goods, pass through the Strait of Malacca each year.³⁰

Since 2017, Global Britain has been driven by the concept of “championing free trade and the international rules-based system”.³¹ Nowhere is this more pronounced than in ensuring free passage of the vital shipping lanes which fuel both the British and the European economies. Here, the UK Armed Forces have been intrinsic to achieving that intent. At the Shangri-La Security Dialogue in June 2018, the then UK Defence Secretary, Gavin Williamson, announced various deployments of three Royal Navy vessels to the Indo-Pacific, including HMS Albion and Argyll. The former was challenged by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy only two months later in August 2018, as the amphibious assault ship passed by the disputed

Paracel Islands, over which China asserts military control.³² Although the Albion was merely passing through international waters on a Freedom of Navigation manoeuvre on its way to Vietnam, China sought to challenge its passage in an aggressive manner.

Since 2018, five Royal Navy vessels have conducted Freedom of Navigation manoeuvres through the South China Sea. This involves a Royal Navy vessel cruising through territorial waters claimed by another state, passing directly under ‘innocent passage’, and without notifying the claimant.³³ These are conceptually distinct from the US Navy’s Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP) in that the latter seek to directly challenge Chinese territorial assertions by conducting their own limited maritime operation in the vicinity of a disputed territory, such as helicopter taskings or man-over drills. These actions are not merely military showmanship, therefore. Rather, they seek to uphold and preserve the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which is

[EU trade in goods#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20abo ut%2040%20%25%20of,North%20America%20\(25% 20%25\),](#) last visited: 8 February 2021.

³⁰ Hand, M., ‘Malacca and S’pore Straits traffic hits new high in 2016, VLCCs fastest growing segment’, *Seatrade Maritime News*, 13 February 2017, available at: <https://www.seatrade-maritime.com/asia/malacca-and-spore-straits-traffic-hits-new-high-2016-vlccs-fastest-growing-segment>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

³¹ ‘Davos 2017: Prime Minister’s speech to the World Economic Forum’, *UK Government*, available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/davos-2017-prime-ministers-speech-to-the-world-economic-forum>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

³² ‘British navy’s HMS Albion warned over South China Sea ‘provocation’, *BBC*, 6 September 2018, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-45433153>, last visited: 8 February 2020.

³³ Hemmings, J. and Rogers, J., ‘The South China Sea and why it matters to Global Britain’, (2019), available at: <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/HJS-South-China-Sea-Report-web-1.pdf> p.18, last visited: 8 February 2021.

directly threatened and often disregarded by China in its attempts to assert its illegitimate territorial and subsequent maritime claims across the South China Sea³⁴ and the Indo-Pacific as a region more broadly.

The US Navy has been conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP) across the South China Sea since 2015, and has actively encouraged allies to join these deployments, to the benefit of both regional partners and more broadly to the global economy. The CSG is due to pass through the South China Sea on its way to the Pacific Ocean. During this upcoming deployment and on expected future Royal Navy taskings across these contested waters, the UK's ability to mitigate the challenges posed by an aggressive and expansionist China will largely depend upon increased engagement with the region. In this regard, there are two viable options for the role of the UK Armed Forces in a Global Britain approach; increased operating with CANZUK allies providing maritime assets, and strengthening the FPDA to help sustain future UK naval operations in the region.

The second pillar to the Global Britain approach – the UK as a force for global good – is closely linked to the first analytical framework of the GSG21 deployment: operating with global allies. Here, the UK can address challenges posed to European security and prosperity regarding the vital shipping lanes across the Indo-Pacific using the UK Armed Forces' regional role.

There remain two options for further defence engagement in this domain. The first is to develop interoperability among the naval forces of the CANZUK states. Canada has increased recent naval deployments through the South China Sea, as seen in in September 2019 and October 2020, when it also headed through the sensitive Taiwan Strait.³⁵ Notable stakeholders in Canadian policy making have been calling for an increased Canadian presence in the region since 2015 in light of heightened Chinese security concerns.³⁶ This desire within some corners of Canadian foreign policy for an increased military presence has led to the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) conducting annual joint training in the region,

³⁴ *Ibid.* p.12.

³⁵ 'Canadian warship sails near Taiwan amid heightened China tensions', *Al Jazeera*, 3 October 2020, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/3/canadian-warship-sails-near-taiwan-at-time-of-high-china-tensions>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

³⁶ Lerhe, E., 'The Asia-Pacific and the Royal Canadian Navy', *Canadian Global Affairs Institute*, (2015), available at: https://www.cgai.ca/the_asia_pacific_and_the_royal_canadian_navy, last visited: 8 February 2021.

including around the South China Sea.³⁷

Australia remains strongly supportive of an increased UK maritime presence. Visiting London only two months after taking office, Australia's Defence Secretary Linda Reynolds encouraged Global Britain to be more 'military engaged' in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in light of threats posed to the region by an expansionist China.³⁸ This sentiment was echoed in London by then UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson who in 2018 explained how the HMS Queen Elizabeth will hopefully be "sailing side by side with Australian vessels"³⁹ once operating in the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, the two countries are cooperating in the Type 26 frigate programme, in which seven Australian defence companies are directly involved. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in October 2020 highlighted the two nations' "shared interest in safeguarding the rules-based global order",⁴⁰ as the UK and Australia continue to invest in their enduring alliance.

The UK should use the opportunity of the CSG to further military

engagement with the CANZUK nations, especially Australia, in the maritime domain. For instance, the UK and Australia should conduct joint F-35 drills together, in addition to the Australian P-8 Poseidon anti-submarine aircraft providing that crucial below-sea threat-detection capability, in conjunction with the Royal Navy's Type 23 Frigates. CANZUK allies should be encouraged to deploy their maritime assets alongside the CSG21 deployment, or certainly in future UK deployments in the region. This increased engagement will directly strengthen two of the three Global Britain pillars; ensuring a secure and prosperous Europe through maintenance of the global shipping lanes in contested waters, and also of the UK acting as a force for good in the world.

In addition to an increase in maritime operations with regional CANZUK partners in the Indo-Pacific, the role of the UK Armed Forces in promoting Global Britain can be strengthened by increasing cooperation within the FPDA. Although lacking a mutual defence clause like NATO, the defence agreement between Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and

³⁷ Rahmat, R., 'Canada, Japan navies enhance interoperability in South China Sea', *Jane's*, 19 June 2019, available at: <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/canada-japan-navies-enhance-interoperability-in-south-china-sea>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

³⁸ Nicholls, D., 'Australia urges Britain to be more 'military engaged' in the Asia-Pacific region', *The Telegraph*, 8 July 2019, available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/07/08/bri>

<tain-should-militarily-engaged-asia-pacific-region-australias/>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

³⁹ 'UK Carrier Strike Group – heading for the South China Sea?', *Navy Lookout*, 30 July 2020, available at: <https://www.navylookout.com/uk-carrier-strike-group-heading-for-the-south-china-sea/>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

the UK has been a robust feature of the south-east Asian security environment for the last 49 years. The UK should use the group's fiftieth anniversary in 2021 to galvanise further cooperation amongst the members. In November 2020, the five nations' defence ministers reaffirmed their support for the agreement, in particular to the integrated capability of the FPDA and maintaining maritime security, while retaining its 'core focus on conventional warfare'.⁴¹ While sensitive to the FPDA founding principle, which states that it must evolve at a pace comfortable to all members, the UK needs to make the case for allowing greater access to member states' port facilities, and increased docking and basing rights for UK forces operating in the region.

The Royal Navy maintains a team of eight permanently deployed personnel at the naval logistics base at Sembawang Wharf in Singapore,⁴² but increased collaboration should also be afforded by other FDPA partners regarding naval logistics and docking rights. In particular, as the UK is intending on deploying 'persistent'

CSG deployments to the Indo-Pacific – thought to be every two years – FPDA partners should facilitate this more forward deployed UK capability. This could include a UK frigate or destroyer deployed on a long-term commitment, in order to help with both FDPA interoperability and with regional security; two core aims of the group. A similar agreement with Bahrain has seen the HMS Montrose conducting a three-year deployment to the Arabian Gulf, aiding regional security.⁴³ Potential locations would be Darwin and Auckland, both of which were visited by HMS Montrose in 2019,⁴⁴ and would allow for an increased UK presence in the western Pacific, able to support UK facilities at Singapore and Brunei, increased access to the South China Sea, and a more robust ability to operate with both Australia and New Zealand in an increasingly contested south Pacific.⁴⁵

⁴¹ 'FPDA Defence Ministers' joint statement', UK Government, 27 November 2020, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/fpda-defence-ministers-joint-statement>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

⁴² 'HMS Montrose visits Singapore', Royal Navy, 20 February 2019, available at: <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2019/february/20/190230-hms-montrose-visits-singapore>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

⁴³ 'HMS MONTROSE (F236)', Royal Navy, available at: [https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/our-organisation/the-fighting-arms/surface-](https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/our-organisation/the-fighting-arms/surface-fleet/frigates/type-23/hms-montrose)

[fleet/frigates/type-23/hms-montrose](https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/our-organisation/the-fighting-arms/surface-fleet/frigates/type-23/hms-montrose), last visited: 8 February 2021.

⁴⁴ 'HMS Montrose on rare visit to Darwin', Royal Navy, 5 February 2019, available at: <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2019/february/05/190205-montrose-visit-darwin>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

⁴⁵ Greenfield, C., 'New Zealand hikes foreign aid budget with eye on contested South Pacific', *Reuters*, 8 May 2018, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-newzealand-pacific/new-zealand-hikes-foreign-aid-budget-with-eye-on-contested-south-pacific-idUSKBN1I9OX8>, last visited: 8 February 2021.

Conclusion

The CSG deployment fulfils a significant function within the UK government's foreign policy, aligning with two of the three Global Britain strategic pillars. First, it works to ensure a secure and prosperous Europe by working with NATO partners in the Mediterranean and by seeking to uphold international laws in the contested South China Sea, on which so much of British and European trade depends.

Second, CSG21 reinforces the role of Britain as a force for good on the global stage. By engaging further with international allies and partners including the US, Japan, NATO CANZUK and the FPDA, the UK is reaffirming its position as a leading defender of the liberal rules-based order. This is further demonstrated by the CSG seeking to uphold the UNCLOS, and a visible display of how the recently-introduced IOpC doctrine for the UK Armed Forces will take effect from conceptualisation through implementation to delivery across defence. A more forward deployed military, engaging and operating with allies, will seek to firmly deter potential peer and near-peer state competitors from challenging the nation's interests, particularly at the sub-threshold level of conflict. The CSG is the first instance of how the UK Armed Forces will become more

forward deployed and engaged across several domains.

The UK government should use the months preceding the CSG's May departure to make plans with those NATO partners who will operate alongside them in the Mediterranean this summer. Such plans should emphasise anti-submarine warfare, given the increasing threat posed by illegal Russian maritime activity across the waters of southern Europe. In addition, the UK should engage further with CANZUK allies during this deployment, particularly with the Australian Air Force and Navy in the South China Sea who operate similar and compatible platforms. Furthermore, the FPDA should be relied upon both in this deployment and in future operations to alleviate logistical, sustainment, and future basing challenges. Finding adequate responses to the questions relating to the serviceability of the CSG at sea, and the ability to use FPDA ports and naval facilities to conduct critical maintenance, will be central to the CSG's survivability while operating across the Indo-Pacific.

Glossary

CANZUK – Canada, Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom. An informal alliance of these states' collective and harmonious defence, security and foreign policy agendas.

CDS – Chief of the Defence Staff. The head of the British military, reports directly to the Secretary of State for Defence, and the Prime Minister. Current CDS is General Sir Nick Carter.

CSG – Carrier Strike Group

CSG21 – Carrier Strike Group 2021 Deployment

EU – European Union

FCDO – Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

FONOP – Freedom of Navigation Operation

FPDA – Five Power Defence Agreement. An informal alliance of Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, United Kingdom. The alliance is centred around a consultative approach regarding each state's defence and security interests – particularly in south east Asia.

IOC – Initial Operating Capability. Denotes that all elements of the group, from fighter jets to radar systems to anti-ship weapons, have been successfully brought together and operated.

IOPC – Integrated Operating Concept. This is the CDS' strategy for UK defence in a post-Brexit age. It focuses on maintaining a forward deployed military presence across the globe to ensure a continuous deterrent against state rivals who seek to challenge UK security interests – particularly in the below-conflict threshold space.

IR – *Integrated Review* of Security, Defence, Foreign Policy and Development.

ISR – *Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance*

JMSDF – Japan Maritime Self Defense Force

MOD – Ministry of Defence

MoU – Memorandum of Understanding

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Alliance

RCN – Royal Canadian Navy

SDSR – Strategic Defence and Security Review. The UK government's published doctrine for establishing the nation's strategic overview and security policies.

SOI – Statement of Intent

UNCLOS – United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

USMC – United States Marine Corps