

Carrier Group Deployment Allows Combined F-35 Integration in Indo-Pac, say Senior US, UK Officers



Distinguished visitors from the USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) and Carrier Strike Group One observe an F-35B Lightning II with the United Kingdom's (UK) 617 Squadron launch aboard HMS Queen Elizabeth as part of Carrier Integration Operations in the Bay of Bengal on Oct. 17. Dual-carrier operations between Carrier Strike Group One and the U.K.'s Carrier Strike Group 21 demonstrate the unmatched interoperability the F-35 provides. *U.K. ROYAL NAVY Royal Navy / LPhot Unaisi Luke*

The United Kingdom's deployment of its HMS Queen Elizabeth carrier strike group on its CSG21 mission has provided opportunities for F-35 joint strike fighter user countries to conduct combined integration and training in the Indo-Pacific region, senior U.S. Navy and U.K. Royal Navy officers told the Pacific Future Forum conference in October.

The CSG's airwing is already an integrated, combined F-35 unit, with the 18 embarked F-35B Lightning II short take-off/vertical landing JSFs comprising 10 U.S. Marine Corps and eight Royal Navy or Royal Air Force aircraft.

However, recent activities in the Indo-Pacific theater have enabled much wider F-35 training and demonstration of multinational integration, U.S. Indo-Pacific Commander Adm. Chris Aquilino told the U.K. government-backed conference, held Oct. 20-21 on the aircraft carrier HMS Prince of Wales at HM Naval Base Portsmouth.

Aquilino highlighted CSG21's presence in a multinational exercise, in the Philippine Sea in early October, which

involved four “large deck” carriers: three aircraft carriers, the Royal Navy’s HMS Queen Elizabeth and the U.S. Navy’s USS Carl Vinson and USS Ronald Reagan; and an amphibious ship, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force’s JS Ise.

“You can see these strike groups conducting multidomain operations, flight operations, air-defense exercises, simulated strikes, mixing together F/A-18 Super Hornets from Ronald Reagan, F-35Bs from the [U.K.], USMC F-35Bs, and F-35Cs from Carl Vinson. That’s an impressive gathering of fifth-generation aircraft that can be moved and put anywhere at a place and time of our choosing,” he said.

“This kind of combined military operation needs to become more normalized. We need to orchestrate it through the lens of campaigns, to ensure we can counter any anti-access threat,” Aquilino said. “This effort to plan, coordinate and execute these kinds of operations is at the core of US INDOPACOM’s approach that you’ll hear referred to as ‘seize the initiative’.”

In what he referred to as “quad-carrier’ operations,” Commodore Steve Moorhouse – the Royal Navy’s commander, U.K. Carrier Strike Group, embarked at sea in Queen Elizabeth for CSG21 – said the Philippine Sea exercise brought together “a combined fourth- and fifth-generation airwing of well over 120 aircraft.”

Briefing the conference from the carrier, Moorhouse said, the “exercise not only helped us to develop our tactics and procedures, but it also allowed us to pursue increasingly complex and integrated activities.”

“Carrier strike has ... a convening power to bring together like-minded countries, and indeed air forces and navies of all sizes and all types around the world,” Moorhouse said.

He highlighted some examples relevant to F-35 capabilities.

“During our time out here, we’ve supported Japan operationalizing its F-35A capability, and [to] introduce into service their F-35B variant. We’ve engaged with the Republic of Korea, which also strengthened understanding of how to operate big decks and how it will integrate its own F-35B capability into the maritime.”

South Korea is developing an aircraft carrier capability, under its CVX program, as the host platform for its F-35Bs.

Moorhouse also discussed how the Queen Elizabeth CSG’s combined U.K./U.S. F-35B airwing had provided effects in the Euro-Atlantic theater, during the first phase of the CSG21 deployment.

“If I look back to our time in the Mediterranean, we were launching the first F-35 sorties from the Mediterranean north into the Black Sea – a round-trip of well over 1,000 miles – whilst also sending jets east into Iraq and Syria on six- and seven-hour missions in support of Operation Shader,” the U.K.’s counter-insurgency activity. Throughout, we were maintaining an on-deck, ready alert capability to respond to Russian air incursions and overflights.”

In the latter case, Moorhouse said over 30 live intercepts of armed Russian fighter and bomber aircraft were conducted in just over two weeks during that part of the mission.