First Sea Lord: Royal Navy Is 'Back to the Modern Era,' Tilting to the Indo-Pacific



Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday, left middle, meets with Royal Navy Adm. Sir Ben Key, First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff of the United Kingdom. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Sean Castellano*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The head of the United Kingdom's Royal Navy said his fleet is modernizing and expanding its reach around the world to respond to the current and future challenges.

"It's the end of the beginning for us, "Adm. Sir Ben Key, First Sea Lord and chief of staff of the U.K. Royal Navy, speaking Feb. 16 at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank, commenting on the Royal Navy's return to operating large aircraft carriers.

Key said he was challenged by the government to grow the Royal

Navy and focus on the changing competition in the world, away from a 20-year focus in the Middle East to more of a tilt to the Indo-Pacific region.

The 2021 deployment of the Royal Navy's Carrier Strike Group 21 – centered on the new carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth and its fifth-generation strike fighters, F-35Bs Lightning IIs – all the way to Japan and back was termed by Key as a "reaching deployment."

"We're merely bringing our history back to the modern era," Key said, also noting that "we're back in the big carrier game."

The HMS Queen Elizabeth and the HMS Prince of Wales were designed from the keel up to support and operate fifth-generation fighters, he noted.

Decades ago, the Royal Navy operated several aircraft carriers and maintained a significant naval presence "east of Suez," as strategists and historians called the presence.

Key also mentioned the presence in the Pacific of two Royal Navy offshore patrol vessels, HMS Spey and HMS Tamar, which are on long-term multi-year deployments to the region, engaging with partner nations.

"We want to be part of an ongoing dialogue," he said, noting the need to enforce rules-based order in the maritime domain, including efforts against transnational crime and fisheries enforcement. He said the Royal Navy needs to work alongside the navies and coast guards of the United States, Australia, New Zealand, France and the South Pacific island nations.

Key cited the recent AUKUS agreement "as a good example of opening up rather than closing down" and said that it would reduce barriers to sharing, and not just in the realm of nuclear-powered submarines.

He sees a benefit of Royal Navy presence in the Indo-Pacific region as not only beneficial with navy leadership but also opportunities for the Royal Navy to learn.