



## DEBATE PACK

CDP-0050 (2019) | 25 February 2019

# Carrier strike strategy and its contribution to UK defence

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Debate initiated by Robert Courts MP

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The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

# 1. Background

Carrier strike is “the ability to use fixed-wing aircraft from a maritime base to project military power from the sea”.<sup>1</sup>

This debate is about the UK’s two new Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers and Lightning aircraft which, together with the Crowsnest airborne radar system fitted to Merlin helicopters, will form the UK’s future carrier strike capability. HMS Queen Elizabeth’s first operational deployment will be in 2021.

The UK has been without a carrier strike capability since 2010, following the decision in the Strategic Defence and Security Review to retire the Harrier aircraft that operated from the Invincible-class carriers.<sup>2</sup>

## **Cost and time into service**

Delivering a Carrier Strike capability is expected to cost £14 billion up to 2021. In 2018 the MOD stated its expectation that the aircraft carriers will be delivered within their re-baselined cost of £6.212 billion.<sup>3</sup> In early 2019 the MOD estimated the unit price for an F-35B at \$115.5 million, compared to \$161 million for the aircraft that were delivered in 2012.<sup>4</sup>

Defence Minister Earl Howe said the MOD expects to declare initial operating capability for carrier strike - consisting of one squadron with 12 aircraft and 18 pilots – in December 2020. Full operating capability, consisting of two squadrons, will be achieved in 2023.<sup>5</sup>

HMS Prince of Wales is expected to start sea trials in late 2019.<sup>6</sup>

## **First deployment to the Pacific**

The Defence Secretary announced the first operational mission of HMS Queen Elizabeth will include the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Pacific region, in a speech on 11 February 2019.<sup>7</sup>

The announcement “scuppered” a planned trip to China by the Chancellor, media later reported, because of China’s unhappiness with the proposed deployment, prompting discord between the Treasury and the MOD.<sup>8</sup> Armed Forces Minister Mark Lancaster said in a written answer “the deployment will include the Pacific region although exact locations and dates for this deployment are yet to be confirmed”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Joint Doctrine Publication 0-10 UK Maritime Power](#), fifth edition, October 2017

<sup>2</sup> [Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review](#), Cm 7948. HMS Ark Royal was decommissioned in 2011; HMS Illustrious continued to serve as a helicopter carrier until she was decommissioned in 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Public Accounts Committee, [Delivering Carrier Strike](#), HC394, January 2018

<sup>4</sup> [HL Deb 8 January 2019 c2115](#)

<sup>5</sup> [HL Deb 8 January 2019 c2115](#)

### American F-35s onboard

The Defence Secretary confirmed US Marine Corps F-35 aircraft will be embedded in the carrier's air wing for her first deployment.<sup>10</sup> The US Marine Corps is the only US Service to operate the same variation of F-35 as the UK (the US Navy will fly the carrier variant). The UK has worked closely alongside the Marine Corps in the F-35 Integrated Test Force (ITF) and Marine Corps pilots and aircraft were involved in flight trials in summer 2018.<sup>11</sup>

While the number of aircraft deployed will depend on the deployment, the MOD has said the minimum number to be deployed will be one squadron – 12 aircraft. Two squadrons are required to declare full operating capability in 2023. The Carrier can have up to 36 aircraft embarked.<sup>12</sup>

### The Carrier Strike Group

An aircraft carrier will not deploy alone. A Carrier Strike Group might be expected, depending on the tasking, to include a destroyer (to provide air defence to the group), an anti-submarine warfare frigate, an attack submarine and auxiliary vessels.<sup>13</sup> The MOD has so far refused to be drawn on exactly which vessels will deploy with HMS Queen Elizabeth as part of the Carrier Strike Group,<sup>14</sup> although it is understood that a Dutch warship will form part of the CSG on its first operational deployment.<sup>15</sup> The group may also include other vessels from Allies – Royal Navy warships have joined French and US carrier groups operating in the Mediterranean and the Gulf in recent years.<sup>16</sup> A Type 45 will also escort Charles de Gaulle on her next deployment in March 2019.<sup>17</sup>

### Support facilities overseas

In April 2018 the Royal Navy opened a Naval Support Facility in Bahrain, the first permanent overseas Royal Navy facility operating 'east of Suez' in nearly 50 years. It will allow the Royal Navy to provide better support to its vessels operating in the region, which will include the new Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers.

In 2016 the UK also concluded an agreement with Oman to establish a permanent Joint Logistics Support Base, including dry dock capability, at the port of Duqm on the Arabian Sea. The facility opened in October 2018 and provides the UK with a strategically important and permanent

<sup>10</sup> "[Defence in Global Britain speech](#)", Ministry of Defence, 11 February 2019. Defence Secretary Michael Fallon first announced plans to embark US F-35s in September 2016 "[Joint press conference by Secretary Carter and Secretary Michael Fallon](#)", 7 September 2016.

<sup>11</sup> "[F-35B finishes initial testing aboard HMS Queen Elizabeth](#)", US Navy press office, 19 October 2018

<sup>12</sup> [HL Deb 8 January 2019 c2113](#)

<sup>13</sup> The Director of Carrier Strike, Rear Admiral Graeme Mackay, described a sovereign carrier strike group as including two destroyers, two ASW frigates, a submarine and associated elements to the Public Accounts Committee in oral evidence on 11 October 2017. Note the use of the word sovereign – interoperability means naval vessels from Allies may form a carrier strike group. HMS Defender provided air defence for the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle in late 2015

<sup>14</sup> [PQ221532](#), 19 February 2019

<sup>15</sup> [Forces Network](#), 24 October 2018

<sup>16</sup> "[Defender refuels for counter-Daesh operations](#)", Royal Navy, 21 January 2016

<sup>17</sup> [PQ212337](#), 29 January 2019

base east of Suez, but outside of the Gulf. According to the MOD “From Duqm, HMS Queen Elizabeth will be able to project influence across an important region. She will fulfil multiple roles from providing air power anywhere at any time, to supporting allies or delivering humanitarian aid and the port itself provides Britain with a hub from which to tackle issues such as the fight against Daesh”.<sup>18</sup>

### **Lightning ready to fly from land**

In January 2019 the Defence Secretary declared the UK’s first Lightning aircraft ‘ready for operations’. This is from land – the aircraft are based at RAF Marham.<sup>19</sup> The UK has taken delivery of 17 aircraft so far and committed to 48 aircraft out of an expected future total of 138 aircraft.

Defence Minister Earl Howe confirmed the first tranche of 48 aircraft will be the F-35B, the short take-off and vertical landing variant capable of flying from the Queen Elizabeth-class carriers but refused to be drawn on subsequent tranches.<sup>20</sup> There has been speculation that future tranches may include the F-35A variant, which cannot fly from the Carriers.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> MOD press release, August 2017

<sup>19</sup> “[Defence Secretary sets sights on next century of British air power](#)”, Ministry of Defence, 10 January 2019

<sup>20</sup> [HL Deb 8 January 2019 c2113](#)

<sup>21</sup> “UK to decide Lightning variant at SDSR, to deploy STOVL F-35B ‘off-strip’”, Jane’s Defence Weekly, 14 November 2018

## 2. Press articles

The following is a selection of press and media articles relevant to this debate.

Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.

**[Hammond slams Defence Secretary for 'entirely premature' threat to send HMS Queen Elizabeth to the Pacific that angered China](#)**

Mail Online  
Tim Sculthorpe  
21 February 2019

**[UK Secures Naval Base in Oman](#)**

The Maritime Executive  
21 February 2019

**[HMS Prince of Wales May Be Ready For Sea Trials In 12 Months](#)**

Forces Network  
7th November 2018

**[Ministry of Defence grounds fleet of 16 F-35 fighter jets](#)**

The guardian  
Peter Walker  
11 October 2018

**[Britain regains carrier strike capability as F-35 stealth jets touch down on HMS Queen Elizabeth](#)**

Daily Telegraph  
Dominic Nicholls  
28 September 2018

**[The biggest warship in British history just met the F-35 for the first time](#)**

Business Insider  
Christopher Woody  
28 September 2018

**[Royal Navy Unveils First In New Fleet Of Carrier Helicopters](#)**

Forces Network  
Rebecca Ricks  
25 May 2018

**[£269m deal signed for Crowsnest airborne early warning and control system](#)**

UK Defence Journal  
George Allison  
16 January 2017

### 3. Gov.uk

#### [Fighter jets join forces with British aircraft carrier to make history](#)

Ministry of Defence

28 September 2018

Royal Navy Commander Nathan Gray and RAF Squadron Leader Andy Edgell were the first pilots to land their stealth F-35 Lightning fighter jets on board the carrier, demonstrating the formidable force HMS Queen Elizabeth and her fleet of jets will be.

The first landings and take-offs from HMS Queen Elizabeth are the culmination of a national endeavour lasting more than a decade to bring an aircraft carrier back to the UK's arsenal. Able to embark up to 36 of the supersonic jets, the carrier provides the Royal Navy with a capability possessed by few others.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

“The largest warship in British history is joining forces with the most advanced fighter jets on the planet. This marks a rebirth of our power to strike decisively from the seas anywhere in the world.

The historic first landing on the deck of HMS Queen Elizabeth is a monumental moment in our country's proud military history. It is also a statement of Britain's determination to promote peace and prevent war.”

## 4. PQs

### [Navy: Far East](#)

19 Feb 2019 | 221532

**Asked by: Sir Nicholas Soames**

To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, when he plans to be able to deploy a fully manned Carrier Strike Group to the Far East.

**Answering member: Mark Lancaster | Department: Ministry of Defence**

HMS Queen Elizabeth's first operational deployment will be in 2021.

As announced by the Secretary of State, the deployment will include the Pacific region although exact locations and dates for this deployment are yet to be confirmed.

The precise number and mix of vessels, and therefore the number of personnel, would depend on the operational circumstances at the time.

The Carrier Strike capability will continue to be developed with a planned transition to a full operating capability by the end of 2023.

### [Topical Questions](#)

18 Feb 2019 | 654 c1190

**Asked by: Anne-Marie Trevelyan**

Will the Secretary of State update the House on how the carrier strike strategy is coming along in terms of the relationship on building it together with other Departments?

**Answered by: Gavin Williamson | Department: Defence**

As I am sure my hon. Friend is aware, when we make major announcements, including on the delivery of carrier strike, they are shared across the Government. The deployment of the Queen Elizabeth and the carrier group to the Mediterranean, the middle east and the Pacific is an important sign that Britain is a global nation and a nation that wishes to play its role in upholding our interests and, of course, our values. As we have invested so much in our global carrier forces, it is important that we put them to sea and demonstrate Britain's global presence, our involvement and our ability to act when required.

### [Navy](#)

07 Jan 2019 | 203804

**Asked by: Kevan Jones**

To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, with reference to the Oral Statement of 18 December 2018, Official Report, column 657, on Modernising Defence Programme, if he will publish the details of the increase in the mass of the Royal Navy.

**Answering member: Mark Lancaster | Department: Ministry of Defence**

As set out in the recent report on the Modernising Defence Programme, we are doing well at realising the plans we set out for the Royal Navy as part of Joint Force 2025. New naval capabilities are coming on stream, most notably the first of our new aircraft carriers, HMS Queen Elizabeth, which is making strong progress towards carrier strike initial operating capability.

**V-22 Osprey Aircraft**

**18 Dec 2018 | HL12215**

**Asked by: Lord West of Spithead**

To ask Her Majesty's Government whether the purchase of V-22 Osprey aircraft to enable air to air refuelling and engine replacement for F-35B aircraft has been addressed as part of the Modernising Defence Initiative.

**Answering member: Earl Howe | Department: Ministry of Defence**

The V-22 Osprey is not part of the current resourced plan to deliver the UK Carrier Strike capability. However, Defence will continue to explore a variety of options to augment the capabilities of the Queen Elizabeth Class carriers in future.

I refer the Noble Lord to the answer I gave him on 7 June 2018 to Question HL 8470.

**Aircraft Carriers**

**18 Jun 2018 | HL8469**

**Asked by: Lord West of Spithead**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the minimum number of fighter aircraft needed to ensure new carriers can (1) operate simultaneously with a full air group in an emergency, (2) maintain an operational conversion unit, and (3) ensure an allowance for repair and attrition.

**Answering member: Earl Howe | Department: Ministry of Defence**

The incremental purchase of F-35B Lightning aircraft is consistent with the introduction to service of our new carriers, as part of a coherent build-up of capability over the lifetime of the Programme. The precise mix of aircraft embarked in the Queen Elizabeth Carrier will be tailored to the type of mission and operational tasking and will grow over time. We plan to buy 138 F-35 Lightning aircraft over the life of the programme.

The Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015 accelerated purchase of our Lightning aircraft and by the end of 2023, alongside the Operational Conversion Unit, we will have two Frontline squadrons available for operations, delivering a carrier strike capability second only to the United States.

[HMS Prince of Wales](#)

20 Oct 2017 | 107125

**Asked by: Luke Pollard**

To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, whether HMS Prince of Wales has been designed to operate in littoral waters.

**Answering member: Harriett Baldwin | Department: Ministry of Defence**

The Queen Elizabeth Class Aircraft Carriers have been designed to operate as part of a Maritime Task Group in both the Carrier Strike and Littoral Manoeuvre roles, offering a significant basing option for the projection of air and amphibious power.

For operational security reasons, we do not comment on specific capabilities, as this would, or would be likely to, prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of the Armed Forces.

[HMS Queen Elizabeth](#)

09 Oct 2017 | 10200

**Asked by: Simon Hart**

To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, what jets are being used on HMS Queen Elizabeth until the F-35 comes into service.

**Answering member: Harriett Baldwin | Department: Ministry of Defence**

HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH is currently undergoing a planned engineering period in Portsmouth, before returning to sea trials; she is not yet a fully operational platform.

The Ministry of Defence has no plans to operate any jet aircraft from HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH other than the F-35B Lightning II, for which the Queen Elizabeth Class carriers have been specifically designed. We have taken delivery of 12 F-35B jets so far, and will have 14 by the end of the year.

We plan to conduct first-of-class flying trials with F-35B in autumn 2018, as part of the programme to deliver an initial Carrier Strike capability by the end of 2020.

[HMS Queen Elizabeth](#)

23 Mar 2017 | 68481

**Asked by: Wayne David**

To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, when he plans that HMS Queen Elizabeth will achieve carrier strike capability.

**Answering member: Harriett Baldwin | Department: Ministry of Defence**

HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH is planned to achieve an initial operating capability for Carrier Strike in December 2020.

**Navy: Task Forces**

**16 Jan 2017 | 59196**

**Asked by: Sir Nicholas Soames**

To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, what plans he has for the proposed composition of the Carrier Strike Group; and if he will make a statement.

**Answering member: Mike Penning | Department: Ministry of Defence**

The Maritime Task Group will be tailored for each task. While the precise number and mix of vessels deployed would be dictated by the prevailing operational circumstances, we could draw from a range of modern and highly capable vessels including the Queen Elizabeth Class aircraft carriers, with embarked F-35B Lightning II and helicopters, surface combatants, submarines and logistic support shipping.

## 5. Other Parliamentary material

### 5.1 Debates

#### [Defence Industry and Shipbuilding](#)

11 Jul 2018 | House of Commons | 644 cc1027-1076

Sixteenth opposition day debate (part two). Motion that this House recognises the important contribution of the defence industry to the UK. Agreed to on question.

### 5.2 Statements

#### [Defence Industry and Shipbuilding - Response to a Resolution of the House - 11 July 2018](#)

15 Oct 2018 | HCWS999

##### **Stuart Andrew (Under Secretary of State for Defence**

**Procurement):** I would like to thank all hon. and right hon. Members, my predecessor, the hon. Member for Aberconwy, (Guto Bebb) and the Minister for Defence People and Veterans (the Rt Hon Tobias Ellwood) for their contribution to the Opposition Day debate on Defence Industry and Shipbuilding which took place on 11 July 2018. The passionate and constructive comments of Members clearly demonstrated this House's support for shipbuilding.

Naval shipbuilding has a particularly important place in our defence industry. As a maritime nation, our prosperity as well as our security hinges on the strength of our navy.

All Royal Navy warships, by which we mean destroyers, frigates and aircraft carriers, will have a UK-owned design, and will be built and integrated in the UK.

All other naval vessels, including Royal Fleet Auxiliaries, will be procured through international competition to secure the best designs and value for money for the UK taxpayer. This does not mean that other naval vessels cannot be built in the UK, rather, it means the UK shipbuilding industry has an opportunity to put forward internationally competitive and innovative bids. We have actively engaged UK shipyards to take part in the Fleet Solid Support ships competition. It is in the Government's and the taxpayers' interests to have a robust competition and we anticipate receiving strong bids from UK shipyards.

We will continue to work closely with the defence industry to energise this crucial sector of our economy to achieve our strategic aim – to have a modern, innovative, internationally competitive sector capable of meeting the country's defence and security needs, both now and in the future.

## 5.3 Early Day Motions

### HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH AND BRITISH SHIPBUILDING

**EDM 99 (session 2017-19)**

**29 June 2017**

**Paul Sweeney**

That this House offers its congratulations to the Aircraft Carrier Alliance on the successful commencement of the sea trials of the Royal Navy's future flagship, HMS Queen Elizabeth; notes that the two Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers, at 65,000 tonnes displacement and 920 feet in length, the largest and most complex naval ship ever built in the UK, represent a world-leading superlative of British industrial capability and form the culmination of a combined effort of 8,000 shipyard workers around the UK, including Govan, Scotstoun and Portsmouth, Rosyth and Appledore in Devon, Tyneside and Birkenhead; further notes the critical role of an extensive supply chain comprising hundreds of companies and 3,000 people based around the UK that provide many of the component parts and materials used to construct both aircraft carriers, including engines and steel; is committed to the continued promotion of a thriving naval and commercial shipbuilding industry in the UK; and will consider a robust National Shipbuilding Strategy that should be comprehensive and effective enough to sustain the positive industrial legacy of the Queen Elizabeth programme for British shipbuilding for decades to come.

## 6. Further reading

[Government response to the Fourteenth Report of Session 2017-19](#), Delivering Carrier Strike, Ministry of Defence, Cm 9596, March 2018

[Delivering Carrier Strike](#), Fourteenth Report of Session 2017–19, Committee of Public Accounts, HC 394, 19 January 2018

[Delivering Carrier Strike](#), National Audit Office, HC 1057, 16 March 2017

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