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**UK TO OPERATE TWO CARRIERS**

The British government has staged a volte-face two years after declaring it would only ever operate one of the two new Queen Elizabeth Class super-carriers being built for the Royal Navy. In October 2010, the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) committed the UK to only keeping a single carrier in commission, with the other ‘in extended readiness’ (in other words mothballed). It was felt the non-operational vessel might even be sold to a friendly overseas power.

The UK would convert the in-service vessel to cats and traps, flying the carrier variant F-35C, rather than Short Take-Off and Vertical Landing (STOVL) F-35B (as originally planned). Earlier this year that decision was reversed, with the Royal Navy now to operate the ships with a ski ramp for launch and an embarked air group of F-35Bs. That was a precursor to the two carriers U-turn, as reported recently by *The Times*. It quoted Secretary of State for Defence Philip Hammond explaining both would be commissioned. He said using the STOVL F-35 ‘gives us, of course, the realistic possibility of bringing both carriers into service.’

Furthermore, aside from providing a carrier at all times in the front line fleet, it would also offer the possibility of surging two on deployment when a crisis required it. The reversal in policy is evidence of UK government’s acceptance that it is logical to both build and operate the ships, something defence experts feel is necessary to properly protect British interests and citizens

around the world. Earlier this year a

US-based think-tank suggested the British would be letting down both their NATO allies and betraying essential defence agreements with the USA if they did not commission both ships. In a report entitled ‘Anchoring the Alliance’ the influential Atlantic Council suggested: ‘The United Kingdom’s deep defence reductions risk undermining its special status as one of NATO’s most capable members. The Cameron government must meet its pledge to renew defence investments and should consider deploying the second of the two newly-ordered Queen Elizabeth Class aircraft carriers with NATO or the United States after 2018, if it cannot deploy it nationally.’ It would have cost a huge amount to mothball one of the vessels - probably as much, if not more, than the £70 million per year estimated to maintain the ship in service (and train the core crew) while preparing for deployment. There are also no customers for such a bespoke vessel, for any likely customers have their own carrier programmes or cannot afford such a complex and large war vessel.

**INDIAN SHIP DELAYED**

Vikramaditya, the Kiev Class carrier that has been rebuilt in Russia’s Sevmash Shipyard for the Indian Navy, will now not be handed over until the third quarter of 2013. Originally due for delivery in 2008, there had been high hopes the Indians would finally receive her in December 2012. Sea trials in September revealed propulsion problems requiring extensive work. It is only the latest setback in a long running saga that has seen the project cost leap from US $947 million in 2005, when the contract was signed, to $2.3 billion. Having been laid down in 1978 the carrier entered service with the Soviet Navy in 1987 (as Gorshkov). Retired from service, she was put up for disposal in 1996. The 45,400 tons Vikramaditya will embark a mixed wing of MiG-29K Fulcrum multi-role combat aircraft, plus Ka-28 Helix Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) and Ka-31 Airborne Early Warning (AEW) helicopters.

**JUAN CARLOS TRIALS**

The Spanish Navy's newest carrier, the SPS Juan Carlos, has conducted trials with the army's Tiger attack and Cougar utility helicopters flying from her to test inter-operability. Though nominally a Landing Helicopter Dock (LHD), Juan Carlos will also be used as an aircraft carrier to complement (and potentially replace) the current flagship, SPS Principe de Asturias, which may be consigned to extended readiness. The larger Juan Carlos will embark AV-8B Harrier II strike-fighters, plus CH-47 Chinook, Sea King, and NH-90 helicopters. She is slated to operate the F-35B when it enters service. The ability of Juan Carlos to operate Tiger attack helicopters will be of great interest to the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). The Australian army also operates the Tiger and the RAN's new Canberra Class LHDs are a variant of Juan Carlos.

**IRAN TRIES SUDAN GUNBOAT DIPLOMACY**

A three-day visit to Port Sudan by an Iranian Navy corvette and supply vessel was not in response to an Israeli air strike on an armaments factory in the capital Khartoum. It was, though, a significant episode of gunboat diplomacy by Tehran, despite being described as a routine visit. Allegedly planned months before the Israeli attack the corvette was Admiral Naghdi while the assigned support ship was the Kharg. The official line from Sudan and Iran is that it came as part of efforts to strengthen diplomatic, political and security ties. Tel Aviv suspects Iranian weaponry is being channelled from the Sudan across Egypt, via the Sinai Desert, to Iran's ally Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Israel has, though, refused to confirm or deny it launched the air strike. The Syrian government - a long-time enemy of the Israelis - has also been receiving significant help from Iran as it brutally suppresses an uprising. The terrorist group Hezbollah in the Lebanon benefits from massive support from Iran, and claims to have recently assembled a drone, supplied by Tehran, which managed to obtain images of sensitive Israeli military sites before being brought down. Israel's night raid on the missile assembly facility in Sudan - allegedly by eight F-15 jet bombers - suggests it will take unilateral action to protect itself. It is felt that, should Iran's nuclear weapons programme show signs of reaching fruition Israel will not hesitate to strike then either. For its part the Khartoum government has been accused of genocide in southern Sudan, so like Iran is considered a rogue regime.

## SECOND CHINESE CARRIER OR NOT?

At the same time as the flare up in tensions with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, the Chinese Defence Ministry found itself moving to quash rumours that a second Chinese aircraft carrier is under construction in Shanghai. Furthermore, it was claimed that the vessel would be launched soon. A spokesman claimed the reports were “inaccurate”. He said that an expanded carrier programme would only be undertaken in light of other national requirements such as economic and social development as well as military. The Chinese at the end of September commissioned their first carrier into service - the rebuilt former Soviet Navy vessel Varyag, now named Liaoning. A Chinese defence ministry official admitted: “This is only the first step of our aircraft carrier development. We still have a long way to go.” He added that the first ship is to be used for training and also necessary scientific developments. A new carrier aircraft said to be created via the acquisition of military technology secrets from the USA has been unveiled. It looks like an amalgam of the F-22 Raptor and F-35C carrier jet.

## UK SUCCESSOR SSBN PROGRAMME BOOSTED

Following on from Prime Minister David Cameron’s assertion that the UK’s future nuclear deterrent should be provided by a new generation submarine, Defence Secretary, Phillip Hammond, announced an additional £350 million in funding for what is called the Successor programme. The new funds will see BAE Systems receive £315 million and Babcock £38 million, following on from £350 million given for initial design work awarded earlier this year.

The funding will help maintain high-end jobs and guarantee the health of the design chain along with expertise that will build the new submarines.

The current Vanguard submarines were intended to decommission from 2022 onwards, but their service lives were extended to 2028 under the Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR).

## RUSSIAN BOOMER TO COMMISSION IN 2013

Russia's first Borey Class SSBN will now commission in 2013 after missing the initial commissioning target of late 2012. This was due to software glitches in the automated launch control system for the Bulava missiles. Alexander Nevsky is now scheduled to join Russia's Pacific Fleet in 2014. Eight Borey and Borey II/Borey-A Class submarines are to be built by 2020, with two currently under construction at Sevmash in Severodvinsk. The first batch of the 170m long, 24,000 tons submarines is designed to carry up to 16 Bulava, while subsequent batches will have 20.