

Royal Navy Supports Japan's F-35B Operations on Converted Warships

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The UK Royal Navy is providing hands-on support to Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) as the country prepares to operate F-35B Lightning II fighter jets from its newly converted Izumo-class vessels. This cooperation comes as part of a growing defence partnership between the UK and Japan, with a focus on enhancing interoperability in the Indo-Pacific region.

A senior Royal Navy pilot has been working closely with JMSDF crews aboard JS Kaga, one of Japan's two Izumo-class ships that have been modified to support short take-off and vertical landing (STOVL) operations. The UK's experience operating the F-35B from HMS Prince of Wales has proven valuable in helping Japan transition from helicopter carriers to fully capable aircraft carriers.

The Japanese vessels have undergone major upgrades to accommodate the F-35B, including flight deck reinforcement, heat-resistant surfaces, and structural adjustments to withstand the rigours of STOVL jet operations at sea.

The collaboration reached a key milestone in November 2024, when Lieutenant Commander Nick Baker of the Royal Navy became the first British pilot to land an F-35B on JS Kaga during live sea trials. These tests involved complex manoeuvres such as rearward and cross-deck landings, which are critical for validating operational capability in restricted maritime conditions.

Japan is acquiring 42 F-35B aircraft to operate from its carriers, supplementing a larger force of land-based F-35As. The UK's involvement includes expertise from the Patuxent River Integrated Test Force in the United States, where Royal Navy pilots contribute to joint trials and training.

Japanese observers have also studied F-35B operations aboard HMS Prince of Wales during recent deployments, gaining insight into launch and recovery procedures and aviation management at sea.

This partnership reflects the UK's broader strategic focus on strengthening defence ties in the Indo-Pacific. Through initiatives such as Operation Highmast, the Royal Navy has expanded its presence and engagement with allied navies across the region.

The growing collaboration between the Royal Navy and JMSDF highlights the shared commitment to enhancing carrier strike capabilities and operational readiness. As Japan moves toward deploying F-35Bs from sea, British support plays a crucial role in shaping the future of its naval aviation.