

Royal Navy and Japan Conduct Joint F-35B Drills

August 5, 2025

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The UK's Carrier Strike Group (CSG) has begun a week-long exercise with Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force to test joint F-35B Lightning II fighter operations in the Philippine Sea.

As part of Operation Highmast, aircraft carrier HMS Prince of Wales has linked up with Japan's destroyer carrier JS Kaga ahead of a series of port visits in Japan and South Korea.

The exercise aims to advance cross-deck operations and interoperability between the two nations' naval forces.

According to the Royal Navy, the operation “focuses on air operations with the UK force due to link up with a Japanese task group, to practise combined F-35 operations.” The UK CSG, led by Commodore James Blackmore, will also work alongside the US Navy during this phase of deployment.

The UK's Prince of Wales carries 18 F-35B jets from the RAF's 617 Squadron and the Royal Navy's 809 Naval Air Squadron. Some of these aircraft are already in South Korea participating in drills.

Japan, which currently operates the F-35A, is still integrating the B-variant into its fleet. It has received the first four F-35Bs of a planned 42-aircraft order, with pilots currently training under the supervision of US Marine Corps aviators. JS Kaga and its sister ship, Izumo, are being modified to support these short take-off and vertical landing jets.

Recent images released by the UK Ministry of Defence showed two US Marine Corps F-35Bs from VMFA-242 operating aboard Prince of Wales, underlining the multinational nature of the mission. Meanwhile, other elements of the UK task group, including HMS Dauntless, RFA Tidespring, and HMS Richmond, are operating independently in the region.

This collaboration follows the UK CSG's recent participation in the Australia-led Talisman Sabre exercise, which involved joint carrier operations with the US Navy and saw Marine Corps Ospreys conduct deck landings on Prince of Wales.

The UK Ministry of Defence has confirmed that personnel from the Japan Maritime and Air Self-Defence Forces may be hosted aboard the British carrier during this leg of the deployment, as Japan seeks to build carrier experience ahead of its full F-35B integration.

The UK Carrier Strike Group departed Darwin, Australia, earlier this week and is expected to remain in the region until September.