

UK Government Divided Over Taiwan Strait Warship Deployment

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A rift has emerged within the UK government over whether to send a Royal Navy frigate through the Taiwan Strait, exposing tensions between defence priorities and diplomatic caution. The debate centres on HMS Richmond, a Type 23 frigate set to accompany the carrier HMS Prince of Wales on a broader Indo-Pacific deployment aimed at reinforcing NATO's presence in contested waters.

Defence Secretary John Healey is urging HMS Richmond to make the transit, arguing that it is vital to uphold international maritime rules. He has reportedly told colleagues that Britain has a responsibility to demonstrate that international waters remain open and free from coercion. Supporters of his view say such a mission would send a strong signal of solidarity with allies at a time when Chinese military activity near Taiwan has intensified. They argue that failing to act risks undermining Britain's credibility as a security partner in the Indo-Pacific.

Foreign Secretary David Lammy has taken the opposite position, warning that the move could severely strain diplomatic relations with Beijing. Lammy has cautioned that China would see the passage as provocative and respond with a diplomatic backlash that could damage trade and wider political relations. Officials within the Foreign Office share these concerns, stressing that the risks of escalation outweigh the limited security benefits. Some also fear Britain could be drawn too closely into Washington's regional strategy, reducing its ability to manage relations with China on its terms.

The final decision rests with Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who must weigh the competing arguments alongside advice from his National Security Adviser. Observers say whichever path the government takes will send an important message: either that Britain is prepared to assert its naval presence in contested waters, or that it prefers a more restrained approach prioritising stability in relations with China.

The Royal Navy's current state of readiness adds further complexity. Several major vessels remain unavailable due to technical and staffing issues, including the destroyer HMS Daring and the submarine HMS Ambush. These limitations have raised concerns about the sustainability of expanding missions to the Far East while maintaining commitments closer to home. One former naval commander warned that overstretching limited resources risks weakening Britain's overall defence posture.

Analysts suggest that the disagreement between Healey and Lammy reflects a broader challenge facing the UK: whether to project global power despite restricted resources, or to pursue a narrower strategy that avoids antagonising major powers. The debate has also revived questions about the long-term direction of Britain's Indo-Pacific policy, introduced under previous governments as a way of deepening security partnerships in the region.

For now, HMS Richmond's potential passage through the Taiwan Strait has become a test case for how the UK balances defence commitments with diplomatic realities. A decision is

expected in the coming weeks, with both allies and rivals watching closely.