

Playing host to the British navy

Written by Chang Feng-lin 陳鳳林

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Beijing's imposition of the Hong Kong National Security Law and a number of other democratic and human rights issues continue to strain relations between the UK and China. The tense situation has significantly decreased the likelihood of British Royal Navy ships being able to continue their practice of docking in Hong Kong's harbor for resupply — a not altogether unpredictable development.

In a Nov. 19 online speech to parliament, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that the HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier would next year lead a British and allied task group to the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean and East Asia.

Johnson also said that the task group could take part in joint exercises with US and Japanese forces, as well as freedom of navigation operations.

The unstated intention is clearly to challenge China's excessive sovereignty claims in the region. Observers also believe the deployment is intended to send a message to Beijing following the increasing political crackdown on Hong Kong and the imposition of the new national security legislation.

The UK government views these actions as breaches of the Sino-British Joint Declaration that came into force in 1997 and included guarantees that Hong Kong's independent political and economic system would remain unchanged for 50 years.

Many British politicians have criticized Beijing's actions, and the UK government has said it would provide a path toward UK citizenship for the almost 3 million Hong Kongers eligible to apply for a British National Overseas passport.

According to the Japanese Web site Nikkei Asia, the UK government's decision to dispatch a carrier group task force to East Asia might be intended to send a powerful message to Beijing about the above issues.

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The HMS Queen Elizabeth is the Royal Navy's largest warship and has the capacity to carry 40 aircraft, and its hydraulic lifts can send four aircraft up from the hangars to the flight deck within one minute.

On a standard deployment the carrier sets sail with a squadron of 14 F-35B stealth fighters and eight helicopters.

The Taiwan-administered Pratas Islands (Dongsha Islands, 東沙群島) are perfectly positioned as a midway stopping point for the British carrier group as it navigates the South China Sea before making a port call in Japan, and it could provide the task group with provisions and water. It would also provide a significant diplomatic breakthrough for Taiwan.

The US Senate's passing of the National Defense Authorization Act provides the basis for reciprocal port calls by ships of the US' and Taiwan's navies. The act demonstrates the continued geostrategic value Washington places on Taiwan, due to its pivotal location in the first island chain.

The US wants to carry out freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea from its bases in Japan, but regardless of from which base they set out, they will have to sail for thousands of kilometers.

Although military vessels are able to operate without interruption, a resupply port along the route would be needed to replenish food and water supplies for the crews.

If further exchanges are initiated on a humanitarian aid basis, perhaps even allowing the British aircraft carrier to make a port call at Kaohsiung, China would not be able to do anything about it.

Taiwan could really make good use of the situation by adopting a more flexible international strategy. Any US warship calling at a Taiwanese port would draw a strong reaction from China, but it has never opposed visits by British ships.

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I had hoped that the visit by Czech Senate President Milos Vystrcil would cause a political reaction allowing the government to initiate further exchanges with European countries.

After all, as Vystrcil said: “Please be reminded that freedom, truth and justice are also your best armor... Please try your best to defend, and keep your sword and armor.”

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Translated by Edward Jones and Perry Svensson

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