



Ministry
of Defence



4/8/1/2/ap

20 March 2024

Dear Jeremy,

Director Gary Martin met the acting chair, John Spellar MP, on 12 January and Deputy Director Stuart Mills met wider Committee members on 16 January to brief them on the UK response to maritime security in the Red Sea and the 12 January strikes on selected Houthi targets. During the latter meeting, the Committee asked for the MOD to provide follow-up answers to four questions.

1. Have Chinese vessels been targeted or attacked in the Red Sea?

Chinese (including Hong Kong) owned vessels have been involved in recent incidents, including some direct attacks. These include:

- An incident on 14 Jan 24 involved Hong Kong owned, Panama flagged Bulk Carrier ORCHID RISING; suspect approach by 2 boats north of BAM, however no attack.
- On 2 Jan 2024 CMA CGM TAGE; a Maltese flagged, likely Chinese owned (Owner Hero Plus Limited appears to be a Hong Kong company) Container Ship was targeted by Houthis with ASBMs, no damage caused.
- On 15 Dec 2023 the MV MAERSK GIBRALTAR; a Hong Kong flagged (ownership is likely linked to China via a Marshall Islands registered company) Cargo ship was targeted by Houthis with BM, no damage caused.
- MSC OLIVER: vessel "affected" by current events. Further detail is available at higher classifications.

Rt Hon Sir Jeremy Quin
Chair, House of Commons Defence Committee
House of Commons
London
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China has a strong wider commercial interest in shipping flows through the Red Sea, as ordinarily many non-Chinese vessels would use it to transport cargo from China (e.g. to European markets via the most direct sea route). China is the world's largest trading nation and 95% of its international trade is by sea. China also has multi-billion dollar investments in the Suez Canal and other shipping infrastructure in Egypt and the wider Red Sea.

2. Is there any evidence that vessels are being reflagged as Chinese or using their signals system to indicate they are Chinese-crewed as a means of avoiding being engaged?

In recent weeks, Chinese vessels transiting the Red Sea have amended Automatic Identification System (AIS) transmissions to clearly identify as "Chinese Vessel".

On 19 January, the Houthis announced that they would not target Chinese or Russian shipping. This followed informal suggestions of agreement to not attack Chinese shipping. The FCDO report Chinese concern at wayward Houthi targeting still placing their ships or citizens at risk.

3. Is RFA Fort Victoria ready for sea? If so, is it crewing levels that are preventing it from sailing?

All RN ships rotate through planned operating cycles involving routine maintenance, repair, training, deployment, leave, essential modification and upgrades. RFA Fort Victoria is about to commence a period of planned maintenance, meaning she is at a lower readiness state than usual. The maintenance requirement is unrelated to crewing levels and will prepare her for future deployment with the Carrier Strike Group. In the meantime, replenishment for the group will be delivered by Royal Fleet Auxiliary Tide-Class vessels.

4. Why has the UK not deployed a carrier, rather than sending RAF aircraft from the Sovereign Base Areas in Cyprus?

In our response to emerging crises, the Ministry of Defence carefully considers all available options for the use of forces held at readiness for contingency. This is balanced with commitments and plans that the UK has made to global activity, including commitments to NATO, to Ukraine, and to emerging demands in the Red Sea. The UK's very high readiness Carrier Strike Group was on operations at sea under NATO Command in October 2023 when the current crisis emerged and will soon deploy as part of a long-planned commitment to NATO's Exercise STEADFAST DEFENDER in Europe. This will see around 20,000 UK personnel across the Armed Forces participating in the largest NATO activity for a decade.

The RAF's multi-role Typhoon Force offers the flexibility and reach to deliver military effect around the globe at speed, such as that demonstrated recently.

On balance, therefore, the use of RAF aircraft from the Sovereign Base Areas in Cyprus was deemed the best use of the UK's forces at the time. Regardless of the other CSG activity in this case, Typhoons from Akrotiri were deemed the best response and have proved themselves an efficient way to target Houthi installations.

The Ministry of Defence continues to monitor the situation in the Middle East very carefully and retains the flexibility to react to ongoing world events. The Carrier Strike Group remains at very high readiness to deploy globally should it be called upon for contingency response.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Grant Shapps', written in a cursive style.

RT HON GRANT SHAPPS MP