

U.S., UK. Naval Leaders Cite Advances in Interchangeability



Capt Christopher Streicher with Marine Fighter Attack Squadron (VMFA) 211 completes pre-flight checks in an F-35B Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter aboard Her Majesty's Ship (HMS) Queen Elizabeth. U.S. Marine Corps / 1st Lt. Zachary Bodner

ARLINGTON, Va. – Senior naval leaders in the U.S. Navy and U.K. Royal Navy have praised advances beyond interoperability to interchangeability as the two navies pledge to work closer together in achieving synergistic improvements in capability.

“Going forwards, there will be a lot more times where we are actually talking about interchangeability, and that’s already happening,” said Adm. Antony “Tony” D. Radakin, First Sea Lord and chief of Naval, speaking Oct. 20 on current mutual U.S.-U.K. initiatives at the 2020 Atlantic Futures Forum webinar.

Radakin cited the current deployment of U.S. Marine Corps F-35B Lightning II strike fighters alongside the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force F-35Bs on the aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth “as an obvious example of interchangeability.”

The First Sea Lord also cited “operations in the North Atlantic with our submarines, with the U.S. submarines, with other nations’ submarines, and their ships and their aircraft. Again, it’s about interchangeability.”

Radakin said, “we’re trying to drive a new standard of a new standard, partly to drive all of us to strengthen our interoperability, but also to go even higher and to recognize interchangeability is going to be a stronger feature in the future.”

The admiral said he and U.S. Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday agreed to focus on four areas: underwater programs; aircraft carrier programs; Marines, their drive for distributed warfare and linking them with Royal Marines and “the future commando force;” embracing technology, such as artificial intelligence, hypersonics; and cyber.

“We look to share the areas where we can come together,” he said.

“The significance of the United States of America investing an air wing onto another nation’s aircraft carrier is a remarkable achievement and it speaks to a remarkable relationship in terms of trust and confidence and ability to work together,” Radakin said, speaking of the Lightning II deployment.

The First Sea Lord noted other areas of cooperation between the U.S. and U.K navies, including an extra-large underwater drone – one of the largest in the world – on which he said “we’re working together so that we both benefit from technology.”

He cited another U.K. program, Maypole, a system of controlling drones by speaking to them, and allowing them to speak to each other.

“We think that that technology, and some of the success that we’ve had, might be of interest to the U.S. These are the things that we are sharing, so that it’s more than just the idea. These are actual projects, which then enable us to move much more quickly,” he said.

“There is no more important time to get after this and no more important issue than how are we going to continue to secure our maritime domain, to allow global freedom of maneuver, in terms of commerce and allowing the flowing of ideas [through undersea internet cables],” said James F. “Hondo” Geurts, assistant secretary of the [U.S.] Navy for Research,

Development and Acquisition, also speaking at the webinar.

“Our ability to scale and transform is directly enabled our relationship together,” he said, citing World War II, the Polaris submarine-launched ballistic-missile program, the Cold war, and more recent counter-terrorism operations.

Geurts also cited the procurement of P-8 maritime patrol aircraft by both nations and the common ballistic-missile compartment that will equip new-generation ballistic-missile submarines of both nations.

“Our collective challenge is, how do we do this at scale, and I’m optimistic at this vision of interchangeability,” he said. “Interoperability is a necessary precursor, but I don’t think it’s enough. It will be an enduring competitive advantage of us, because that’s not something you can reproduce by a totalitarian or non-democratic regime.”

Geurts said interchangeability should not be limited to platforms, but should go beyond platforms and government agreements.

“I’m equally optimistic in the work we’ve been doing together in getting interchangeability of ecosystems, of ideas and relationships all the way down to the deckplate level, so that we can attack this full top down and bottom up and not just government to government.”