

By wielding different navies' aircraft carriers, NATO is showing off an 'easy to miss lever' of combat power

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US Navy/MCS3 Crayton Agnew USS Harry S. Truman, center, with Italian aircraft carrier ITS Cavour, left, and Spanish amphibious assault ship ESPS Juan Carlos I in the Adriatic Sea during Neptune Shield 22, May 31, 2022.

Three times this year, NATO has assumed command of members' aircraft carriers for exercises.

The drills have been meant to practice integrating national forces under alliance command.

That integration will be vital to conducting effective operations in a war, experts and officials say.

US and NATO countries are dispatching planes filled with military equipment for Ukraine – here are some of the weapons sent to hold back Russian tanks and aircraft. The US and other NATO countries have sent thousands of weapons to Ukraine in recent weeks.

The shipments include anti-armor and anti-aircraft missiles which could be used against Russian tanks and helicopters .

The weapons are being used by Ukrainian fighters to push back Russian forces. As fighting in Ukraine enters its third week, [reports this week](#) revealed heavily-laden military cargo jets are pouring into an airfield across the border, stacked with weapons and military equipment to help Ukraine's forces hold back the advance of Russian troops.

Throughout the buildup to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, NATO countries, including the US, insisted they would not send troops to the region amid concern that the presence of their personnel on the ground would lead to a dangerous escalation of the conflict.

That stance has continued since Moscow ordered its troops into Ukraine on the morning of February 24. Instead, NATO nations and other countries are supplying Ukraine's defence forces - vastly outgunned and outnumbered by Russia's military - with weapons and equipment that Kyiv hopes will be able to help staunch Russia's advance.

Around 17,000 anti-armor weapons have been sent to Ukraine in the last number of weeks and are being pressed into use against Russian tanks and other hardware.

As of March 8, Ukrainian fighters had destroyed over 1,000 armored personnel carriers, 303 tanks, 120 artillery systems and 80 helicopters, [The Kyiv Independent](#) claimed.

With heavy transport aircraft continuing to deliver consignments of equipment critical for Ukraine's defense, we take a look at some of the weapons being sent to Ukraine as it tries to hold back Russia's advances.

Three times this year, NATO has assumed command of member navies' aircraft carriers to practice integrating national forces under alliance leadership, an often-overlooked capability that experts and officials say is vital for NATO to operate effectively in wartime.

In late January, Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO took command of the USS Harry S. Truman carrier strike group from the US Navy's Italy-based Sixth Fleet as part of the NATO-led exercise Neptune Strike 2022.

That handover "demonstrates the power and cohesiveness of our maritime forces and the NATO alliance," Vice Adm. Gene Black, who commands both Sixth Fleet and Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO, [said](#) at the time.

In mid-May, Black's NATO command again assumed control of the Truman strike group as part of Neptune Shield 2022, which focused on "overcoming the complexities of integrating command and control," according to a [release](#).



US Navy/MCS3 Tate Cardinal A US Navy MH-60S Sea Hawk helicopter alongside the Italian Navy aircraft carrier ITS Cavour in the Adriatic Sea during Neptune Strike 22, February 2, 2022.

At the end of May, Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO also assumed command of Italian aircraft carrier ITS Cavour and its strike group, a first for NATO, as part of Neptune Shield.

Integrating with Cavour "removes artificial seams between the maritime and air domains," said British Royal Navy Rear Adm. James Morley, deputy commander of Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO.

The exercises were what NATO called "vigilance activities," which US Air Force Gen. Tod Wolters, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, said "strengthen our ability to seamlessly integrate maritime strike capabilities to support deterrence and defence."

Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO is unique in that it provides "a separate, direct line of control" from Wolters' command to specific strategic forces, usually carrier strike groups, said Joshua Tallis, a research scientist at CNA, a Virginia-based research and analysis organization.

That allows Wolters "to maneuver those high-value units across the theater as a nimble and responsive force in a way that is largely unparalleled" elsewhere in NATO, Tallis, an expert on naval operations, told Insider.



Business Insider USS Harry S. Truman, right, ITS Cavour, center, and the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle in the Mediterranean Sea, February 6, 2022. Bela Chambers/U.S. Navy

The exercises were also part of Project Neptune, which began in early 2021 [with the goal](#) of defining the process through which Sixth Fleet and Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO would handle the transition of warships between national and NATO command.

Project Neptune activities have strengthened the "resilient, multinational command structure" that is "a critical but easy-to-miss lever of NATO's combat power," Tallis told Insider.

Integrating air, sea, and land operations is challenging and depends on "unflashy staff work that can be easy to neglect," Tallis said, adding that such work is harder in the NATO context, in which 30 members have to work with each other and with the alliance's command structure.

When command-and-control of US Navy ships shifts to NATO, "back-end staff work" that is critical to that integration "shifts to a different group of people in a different building in a different country," Tallis said. "Doing that well is not a given — hence the value in these demonstrations."

Mastering complexity, building cohesion



US Navy/Lt. Mark Nash US Navy and Marine Corps aircraft over Royal Navy aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth and a US Navy landing craft, air cushion, May 17, 2021.

Amid heightened tensions with Russia over the past decade, NATO navies have reemphasized [being present and capable of operating](#) around Europe, especially in [hotspots like the Black Sea](#). NATO also set up its newest operational-level command, the Virginia-based Joint Forces Command Norfolk, in 2018 to ensure that the [waters between Europe and North America stay open](#).

The national- and NATO-level interest in improving integration has been evident in recent exercises, many of which prominently featured aircraft carriers.

Ships and aircraft from NATO allies accompanied new Royal Navy aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth [on its maiden deployment in 2021](#) and joined the French-led exercise [Polaris](#), which centered on the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle, late last year.

"Increasingly, NATO allies are expanding their high-end maritime war-fighting capabilities by integrating into exercises and carrier strike group deployments," the US Navy [said](#) ahead of the Polaris exercise.

In February, Truman and Cavour [trained with de Gaulle](#) in the Mediterranean to improve "their capacity to work as a cohesive team in defense of national and allied interests," the US Navy [said](#).



Royal Navy/LPhot Bill SpurrF-35s fly by HMS Prince of Wales as it sails with USS Mount Whitney, left, and USS The Sullivans off the coast of Norway, March 11, 2022.

In March, HMS Queen Elizabeth's sister ship, HMS Prince of Wales — which [took over](#) as NATO's command ship in January — [led naval forces](#) during Cold Response 2022, the largest military exercise hosted by Norway since the Cold War.

Russia's attack on Ukraine in late February has added to tensions in Europe and complicated life for NATO navies.

Truman remained in the eastern Mediterranean in the weeks prior to Russia's attack to reassure allies and, after the invasion began, to support alliance members with aerial patrols over Eastern Europe.

At the start of the war, Russian warships shadowed US and French carriers in the Mediterranean, Adm. Pierre Vandier, French Navy chief of staff, [said](#) in May.

The Russian ships included cruisers, frigates, and submarines, "so it was a very complex environment," Vandier said.

When Moscow's intentions in Ukraine became clear, work being done for Project Neptune "served as a logical focal point for NATO alliance cohesion and signaling activities" and facilitated "calibrated demonstrations of strength," Tallis told Insider.

The project has also highlighted the value of mastering the complexity of "rapidly shifting a large force package," like a carrier strike group, at an especially tense moment, Tallis said.

"That capability, and its political implications, have only taken on more urgency in the last three months."