

There was a hint today from UK Defence Secretary Liam Fox that there could be a radical change to the new aircraft carriers already under construction. When the design was first unveiled, some play was made of the fact that they were "adaptable" - i.e. while the principal plan was to operate STOVL aircraft (F-35B replacing Harriers) the design could allow for catapults and arrestor wires to be installed instead. Writing in The Times, Dr Fox criticised "the decision to order aircraft carriers that are not fully interoperable with our two closest allies - the United States and France. Neither the French Rafale nor the US Navy's planned version of the Joint Strike Fighter could land or take off from our carriers." "The design of the carriers also meant that the variant of JSF as planned is the most expensive." Although he goes on to say that "getting the carriers right would take longer and is likely to cost more", there are clear seeds there. After all, the F-35C - US Navy variant - is cheaper, has a longer range and greater "throw weight". This could justify a reduction in numbers on the basis of greater capability, and although time is money - as today's National Audit Office Major Projects Report clearly shows - there wouldn't be too much gnashing of teeth if delay in bringing the new carriers into service could be sold as being on the basis of capability and flexibility not just expedience. Then there's the politics. On November 2nd French President Sarkozy meets Prime Minister David Cameron at Portsmouth. Sarkozy is about to order more Rafales, a decision that is causing great scandal in Paris as he's accused of giving a "sweetener" to Serge Dassault to buy Le Parisien newspaper which would then back Sarkozy in the run-in to the 2012 Presidential elections. France also has its defence budget problems. It needs a second carrier to augment the small, under powered Charles de Gaulle. Bear in mind that France pitched in a nine figure sum at the design stage of the new UK carriers, so they have good visibility of its technical spec. How convenient would be the ability for maritime Rafales to hitch a ride on a UK carrier instead? And what a driver for the much-mooted improved Anglo-French defence co-operation. And again today, US Secretary of State Clinton is reported to be concerned about defence cuts and says "Each country has to be able to make its appropriate contribution." How valuable would it be for Cameron to call Clinton and say "well, we've taken it to heart and we're going to make our carriers more interoperable with yours - and remember that our new strategic tanker aircraft use probe and drogue like the US Navy do, so we can keep backing you up with logistics as we have over Afghanistan so far". Added to which France is in the market for strategic tankers, so some kind of joint force would be another warm fuzzy for Britfrogs to push the way of the cousins. Last straw in the wind? Recently a dozen UK Forces personnel have been undergoing training on cat and trap operations over in the USA....

To clarify : In the 6 years 2005 - 2010 31 Royal Navy and Royal Air Force personnel underwent training as pilots, landing safety officers or weapons systems officers on US carriers. The tempo is picking up : in the 3 years 2011-2013, which of course is right in the middle of the UK carrier build programme, a further 51 will be trained.

In answer to a Parliamentary question, Defence Minister Lord Astor of Hever said : "The current design of the proposed "Queen Elizabeth" class aircraft carriers is also configured for the Short-Takeoff and Vertical Landing aircraft variant of the Joint Combat Aircraft (JCA) but this carrier design could be adapted for the operation of catapult-assisted take-off aircraft. If this option is chosen, the training plan would be altered."

In other words, are we already training the trainers?