

If they don't become otherwise engaged in Libya, ships and Royal Marines from the Royal Navy's Response Force Task Group, currently deployed on Op Cougar 11 in the Mediterranean Sea, today starts the first major exercise between the Royal Navy and Albanian armed forces since Albania joined NATO in 2009.

Exercise Albanian Lion, which takes place between 27 May - 3 Jun 11, is claimed to be the most significant defence cooperation to date between the two NATO allies. Involving ships, helicopters and hundreds of Royal Marines, as well as Albanian forces, the Exercise will focus on amphibious operations.

Colonel Haydn White Royal Marines, Deputy Commander 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines, will command the Landing Force. He said: "Albania is a NATO ally with whom the UK enjoys a positive relationship and this exercise is a milestone in the cooperation between our armed forces. We hope it is the first of many. We thank the Albanian people for their support and look forward to working together again in the future".

It's worth noting that 3 Commando Brigade also is currently leading Task Force Helmand.

Commodore John Kingwell RN, commanding the UK Task Group from HMS Albion, said: "The Response Force Task Group is the UK's maritime quick reaction force. This long planned deployment involves multi-national amphibious exercises with partner nations, such as Albania, which reaffirm the Royal Navy's ability to respond at short notice to unforeseen world events."

COUGAR 11 was embarked upon to demonstrate the Response Force Task Group (RFTG) concept. RFTG was announced in last years Strategic Defence and Security Review and is the heart of the UK's maritime contingent capability, held at very high readiness to respond to unexpected global events. It highlights the enduring need for the armed forces to plan and train for unforeseen events that may occur in parallel with the defence main effort of current operations.

Initially, the Task Group will demonstrate its amphibious capabilities through multi-national exercises in the Mediterranean, before conducting further exercises in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Gulf.