

# NATO starts £1m exercise

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FOUR merchant ships will inch their way out of Loch Ewe next Thursday, past the Isle of Lewis and turn east towards their destination, Norway, as part of a NATO exercise reflecting what the alliance cautiously calls "the changing times" in East-West relations.

More than 270 ships and submarines, and over 320 aircraft from ten countries will take part in Sharp Spear '89, which begins today.

The £1.2 million exercise, which will be concentrated in the waters around Scotland, the Western Approaches, the North Sea and sea lanes to Norway, is unusual in that it is almost entirely European.

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It is designed to improve the ability of NATO maritime forces to conduct operations in the shallow seas around Europe and to protect convoys carrying reinforcements.

Whereas most NATO Atlantic reinforcement exercises involve a strong presence from the United States, only a handful of US vessels will take part in Sharp Spear.

Unusually the Spanish have agreed to take part. They normally limit their participation in alliance exercises to their waters and the Mediterranean.

But next week the freighters

pulling out of Loch Ewe should be escorted by Spanish and Dutch frigates and Spain's modern aircraft carrier, the Principe Des Asturias, will provide anti-submarine and air cover as ten convoys manoeuvre over the next two weeks.

The only other aircraft carrier taking part is the Ark Royal.

NATO is careful to point out that one of the outcomes of the talks on conventional forces in Europe, just resuming in Vienna, could be huge reductions in the number and scale of forces based in West Germany, hence the renewed importance of reinforcement exercises like this.