

# UK defence minister demands greater military “reach and lethality” post-Brexit

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Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson laid out proposals for a massive escalation of British militarism post-Brexit in a speech to the Royal United Services Institute.

The UK must be ready to use “hard power to support our global interests,” he insisted. His speech in London Monday was framed around the need to confront Russia (mentioned 14 times), which was “rebuilding its military arsenal,” and China, which is “developing its modern military capability and its commercial power.”

Quoting Winston Churchill on the necessity of British forces being able to develop “a reign of terror down enemy coasts,” Williamson declared that “Churchill’s vision” was now the goal for “our Royal Navy and for our Royal Marine Commandos.”

Virtually any pretext could be used by Britain’s armed forces to go into combat, because the “very character of warfare itself is changing” as “boundaries between peace and war are becoming blurred.”

With Britain set to exit the European Union (EU) and tensions mounting between the UK and the continent’s main powers, Germany and France, the speech was a reassertion by the May government—which said it had approved the speech—that the alliance that mattered most militarily to the UK was with the US. NATO, Williamson said, “remains the bedrock of our nation’s defence.” Other “European nations need to be ready and capable of responding” to “Russian hostile acts,” he said. In a pointed attack on Germany and France, he stressed that what mattered was “Stepping up to the 2 percent [of GDP for defence spending] NATO target and not being distracted by the notion of an EU Army.”

Williamson outlined the many NATO operations Britain was already involved in. Having sent “a Battle Group to Estonia to support NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence,” “we lead multi-national maritime

task groups in the Mediterranean and defend the skies over the Black Sea and the Baltics.”

Ensuring Russia’s neighbours would be free “from Russian interference” is “why the United Kingdom is leading the nine-nation Joint Expeditionary Force which in a few months’ time will take part in its first deployment to the Baltics.”

The first operational mission of the HMS Queen Elizabeth, one of two new UK aircraft carriers, “will include the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Pacific region. ... Significantly, British and American F35s will be embedded in the carrier’s air wing. “Enhancing the reach and lethality of our forces and reinforcing the fact that the United States remains our very closest of partners. We share the same vision of the world. ... We have the unique ability to integrate with US forces across a broad spectrum of areas. And, we are more determined than ever to keep working together.”

Williamson echoed the Pentagon’s 2017 National Security Strategy document, endorsed by US President Donald Trump, which argued that the US was entering an era based on “great power competition” against other global powers.

In such an era, “we cannot be satisfied simply protecting our own backyard,” he said. “The UK is a global power with truly global interests. A nation with the fifth biggest economy on the planet. A nation with the world’s fifth biggest Defence budget and the second largest Defence exporter. And since the new Global Great Game will be played on a global playing field, we must be prepared to compete for our interests and our values far, far from home.”

This “global engagement is not a reflex reaction to leaving the European Union. It is about a permanent presence,” he declared. A Littoral Strike Ship group of

globally deployable “multi-role vessels” would be established, “able to conduct a wide range of operations, from crisis support to war-fighting.” These “motherships” would “be based East of Suez in the Indo-Pacific and one based West of Suez in the Mediterranean, Atlantic and Baltic.”

Williamson outlined spending increases for every section of the armed forces and said £160 million—ring-fenced from the last budget as a Transformation Fund for military spending—would be spent on developing “swarm squadrons of network enabled drones capable of confusing and overwhelming enemy air defences.” These would be deployable by the end of 2019.

The UK’s leading role in the global mass surveillance operation against the world’s population would be pushed ahead, with Britain building “on our established relationship with the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Canada as part of the Five Eyes.”

Military spending would be maintained with an extra “£1.8 billion of Defence funding, keeping us on track.” Nuclear capability would be strengthened, to “deliver the new [nuclear] submarines on time and means that we are spending £4 billion every year to ensure the ultimate guarantee of our safety for another 50 years.”

The pro-Brexit media were enthused by Williamson’s militarist agenda. Despite being gaffe prone, Williamson is seen as a rising star in the Conservative Party. Given the crisis enveloping Prime Minister Theresa May, who has pledged to stand down as party leader before the next election, his speech was a de facto leadership bid.

However, the *Guardian*, which is usually on board with any sabre rattling against Russia, was scathing. Columnist Simon Jenkins ridiculed Williamson’s speech as hot air because billions more would be required in defence funding. This downplaying of the threat posed by the most stalwart pro-Remain newspaper, presenting the Tories as the political version of the Keystone Cops, is dangerous nonsense.

The Tories are mired in crisis, but Williamson speaks for a party soaked in militarism that knows full well that military spending must be ramped up massively. Moreover, Williamson is giving political voice to the growing clamour among top figures in the armed forces that the Ministry of Defence budget be vastly increased at the expense of public spending.

Labour’s shadow defence secretary and warmonger, Nia Griffiths, had no substantive disagreements with Williamson, complaining only that the expansion of British imperialism’s military machine globally was imperilled due to spending cuts. Griffiths complained, “The UK’s ability to play our role on the international stage has been completely undermined by eight years of Tory defence cuts. The Conservatives have slashed the defence budget by over £9 billion in real terms since 2010 and they are cutting armed forces numbers year after year.”

She tweeted, “Gavin Williamson likes to talk tough but look at the Tories’ record: Army cut by 25% RAF cut by 25% Defence spending down £9bn.”

In her own speech to RUSI last June, Griffith said Labour “would warmly welcome any rise” in defence spending. This was crucial as, “We are just nine months away from our departure from the European Union. One of the biggest challenges to our global strategic role since the Second World War.”

Despite Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn’s mealy-mouthed statements in opposition to war and militarism, he has allowed the Blairites to determine Labour’s defence policy. Asked ahead of the 2017 General Election if she agreed with Corbyn’s declaration that he would not authorise the launching of a nuclear bomb, Griffith said this was not Labour’s policy. “We are prepared to use it, and I’m certainly prepared to use it.”

Corbyn again fell into line, with Labour’s election manifesto supporting both NATO and the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons system. Labour pledged a complete strategic defence review that would “ensure that our Armed Forces are properly equipped and resourced to respond to wide-ranging security challenges.”



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