

We are opening new overseas bases to boost Britain

Interview
By Christopher Hope
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Britain will open two new military bases in the Caribbean and south-east Asia as the country looks to step up its military presence overseas after Brexit, Gavin Williamson reveals today.

The Defence Secretary urges Britons to stop downplaying the country's influence internationally and recognise that the UK will stand tall on the world stage after leaving the European Union.

In an interview with *The Sunday Telegraph* in his Ministry of Defence office, Mr Williamson says: "We have got to be so much more optimistic about our future as we exit the European Union."

"This is our biggest moment as a nation since the end of the Second World War, when we can recast ourselves in a different way. We can actually play the role on the world stage that the world expects us to play."

"For so long – literally for decades – so much of our national viewpoint has actually been coloured by a discussion about the European Union."

"This is our moment to be that true global player once more – and I think the Armed Forces play a really important role as part of that."

Britain will turn its back on the 1968 "east of Suez" strategy, which led to Britain withdrawing from military bases in Malaysia, Singapore, the Persian Gulf and the Maldives, he says.

"So many times when you have been out into the Middle East or the Far East they actually bring up the policy of 1968 east of Suez," he says.

"We have got to make it clear that is a policy that has been ripped up and Britain is once again a global nation."

Mr Williamson is working on plans for two new UK bases in the Caribbean and the Indo-Pacific region so Britain can project her influence militarily after Brexit.

Britain already has permanent joint operating bases in Cyprus, Gibraltar, the Falkland Islands and Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean.

A source close to Mr Williamson said the new bases could be sited in Singapore or Brunei in the South China Sea, or Montserrat or Guyana in the Caribbean "within the next couple of years".

He says: "I am also very much looking at how can we get as much of our resources forward based, actually creating a deterrent but also taking a British presence."

"We are looking at those opportunities not just in the Far East but also in the Caribbean as well."

The bases would have service and maintenance staff, supply ships and equipment sited there.

Mr Williamson has deliberately attempted to ensure that UK military assets are visibly deployed around the world over the past year as a demonstration of British military might.

He says: "For the first time in a



generation this Christmas we have two ships operating in the Pacific Ocean a long way from home.

"We are the second biggest inward investor into that region. So if our economic interests are there we should also have a military interest there."

With just over 90 days until Britain leaves the European Union, the Defence Secretary says it is time to strike a more optimistic tone about the UK's future outside the EU.

Mr Williamson predicts that the "political focus will shift quite dramatically" after Brexit and the UK has to build "deeper relationships with Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Caribbean countries, but also nations right across Africa."

He says these countries will "look to us to provide the moral leadership, the military leadership and the global leadership".

"They realise that we are good partners and actually the values that we stand for of tolerance, democracy and justice, these are the values that they hold dear to their hearts."

Mr Williamson says he is frustrated by the national pastime of

Gavin Williamson, the Defence Secretary, says that to help the UK stand tall after Brexit, the Armed Forces will provide moral as well as military leadership

undervaluing the potential for Britain's global influence, citing research by Tory peer Lord Ashcroft.

The research showed that while "the rest of the world saw Britain standing 10 feet tall – when actually we stood six feet tall; Britons saw us standing five feet tall, not the six, and certainly not the 10".

Mr Williamson brushes aside questions about why the state is considering deploying troops before and after Brexit day, saying that they would have been readied with or without a deal.

He says: "This is good sensible planning to make sure that everything runs as smoothly as possible."

"Good planning is what the British people expects the Government to do. It isn't about anything else than just to make sure there is a resource there if people ask for it."

"We were always planning to carry a contingency there, just to make sure that things run smoothly with or without a deal because actually it is sensible to be able to have a resource that people are able to call upon, and if there is any issue or anyone wants a bit of extra help, the people are there."

Turning to the escalating crisis of migrants coming across the English Channel in rubber dinghies, Mr Williamson said all three Services were ready to help if called on by the Home Office.

He said: "We have not had any requests as yet but if the Home Office is in need of Armed Forces support then our Navy, Air Force and Army stand ready to assist."

"Our military is always willing to help civil authorities, as we did in Salisbury this year and will continue to do so, as and when required."

The Navy is due to start taking delivery of additional offshore patrol vessels – which are tasked with fisheries protection and fighting drugs smuggling – at the beginning of

next year, taking the fleet from three to eight.

On the departmental front, Mr Williamson's team of officials are currently drafting a new law, to be published as early as next month, to provide greater protections for all members of the Armed Forces from prosecution.

He says he wants to give these protections not just to veterans of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, but to "veterans of conflicts before that and conflicts since that, Iraq and Afghanistan".

Mr Williamson wants to give "them the confidence that the country they have always supported, the country they have always defended, is also the country that supports and defends them".

He also insists that problems with a contract run by Capita, which has seen army recruitment flatline, are being sorted out after he employed 200 servicemen and women into recruiting centres.

He says: "Having the experienced sergeant out there, talking about their experiences, talking about the brilliant quality of life that they can have by joining the Armed Forces."

"We have put 200 service personnel into the system, selling the message, and what we have seen is a large spike in the number of people starting to apply."

"It is a really important message, getting the Armed Forces on the front line of recruitment, banging the recruitment drum, selling the actual dream of what the Armed Forces can do."

"I want the very best in the Army, the Navy and the Air Force and we are determined to get them."

Mr Williamson, 42, has seen his stock rise after he was widely credited with helping to persuade Theresa May, the Prime Minister, not to proceed with a key vote on her Brexit deal in the House of Commons earlier this month. And last week Mr

'In my time as Defence Secretary there are people who have felt that I have been outspoken on behalf of the Armed Forces. I think it is my duty to do that'

Williamson had to angrily deny two Sunday newspaper reports that he was overheard plotting in a Mayfair restaurant about how he could become Tory leader.

In our interview, Mr Williamson – a former Government chief whip – declines twice to say that he wants to become party leader one day and instead insists he is focusing on the day job.

He says: "I have got the world's best job as Defence Secretary and that is all I am interested in."

The next big challenge facing Mr Williamson is this spring's Comprehensive Spending Review, which will set departmental spending levels for the next years.

"This time last year all the speculation, all people were talking about, was what cuts we were going to see in the Armed Forces."

"Now we are talking about what a bright future our Armed Forces have. The investment that we are putting into it."

Mr Williamson's inspiration is two teenage Welsh Guardsmen he met on their first operational tour of Afghanistan, saying he was "inspired by what they were doing, inspired by their commitment and their dedication".

He adds: "I owe it to them to be the one who actually bangs the drum for them."

"All I want to do is do this job and do it to the best of my ability. In my time as Defence Secretary there are people who have felt that maybe I have been outspoken on behalf of the Armed Forces or pushed things."

"I think it is my duty to do that. You have got men and women who serve our country who do things for us to keep us safe that few others would be willing to do or would have the capability to do."

"So if I am the voice that bangs that drum for them – no apology whatsoever, I see it as my duty, I see it as my job."

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Foreign Secretary backs privately funded royal yacht to boost post-Brexit trade deals

TELEGRAPH CAMPAIGN

By Christopher Hope and Asa Bennett

JEREMY HUNT has become the latest Cabinet minister to back a campaign for a new privately funded royal yacht *Britannia* to help Britain win trade deals after Brexit.

The Foreign Secretary has made it clear that, while he would not want to see public funds used to build the yacht, he supports a new royal vessel paid for by private subscription.

Scores of MPs, including Cabinet ministers such as Liam Fox and Michael Gove, have already backed a *Telegraph* campaign for a new royal yacht which could act as a catalyst for inward investment deals after Britain leaves the European Union in March.

The previous royal yacht *Britannia*, which was decommissioned in 1997, often hosted "trade days" when captains of industry were encouraged to

invest in the UK, and is estimated to have helped secure £3 billion-worth of trade deals between 1991 and 1995.

A source close to Mr Hunt, who is one of the front-runners to replace Theresa May as Tory leader, said that "if private donors came along" he would "welcome" a new yacht. But a spokesman for Mr Hunt confirmed: "We have no plans to support a new royal yacht ourselves."

In an interview today with *The Sunday Telegraph*, Gavin Williamson, the Defence Secretary, avoided committing public money for a new royal yacht, saying he has "a flagship for the Royal Navy" – she is called HMS *Queen Elizabeth*.

A replacement for *Britannia* – which is now a visitor attraction berthed in Edinburgh – was proposed by John Major's government before the 1997 election, but was dropped by Tony Blair's government in October of the same year.

Craig Mackinlay, the Tory MP, welcomed Mr Hunt's support for a new yacht. He said: "We need to consider how Britain projects herself on the world stage, with a WTO [World Trade Organisation] Brexit particularly allowing the UK to negotiate new interna-

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tional trade deals in the shortest time."

Commodore Anthony Morrow, the last captain of the previous *Britannia*, said: "I have no doubt that such a ship in service for the UK would be a huge benefit to our maritime nation heading towards an exciting future."

Ian Maiden, a millionaire businessman who wants to see a new yacht to connect the UK to Commonwealth countries after Brexit, added: "A high-profile statement of confidence to support our trading intentions could be the commissioning of a state-of-the-art ship as a promotional platform, similar in size and status to HMY *Britannia* of times past."

The news comes after it emerged that the Queen had secretly lobbied the Major government for a replacement yacht in the mid-Nineties. In a letter dated May 1995, Sir Kenneth Scott, the Queen's deputy private secretary, made it clear the Queen backed a new royal yacht.

Last month the Duke of York, the Queen's second son, said a new royal yacht could be a "tool in the bag" to help Britain's businesses develop trade relationships around the world.