U.K. Royal Navy to Establish Permanent Squadron in Middle East; QE to Deploy with U.S. F-35s

ARLINGTON, Va. — The United Kingdom plans to establish a permanent naval presence in the Middle East, putting more ships "East of Suez" and broadening the influence of the Royal Navy. The Royal Navy's new aircraft carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth, will deploy to the region with an air wing that will include U.K and U.S. F-35 strike fighters. The United Kingdom also plans to develop a class of Littoral Strike Ships.

In a Feb. 11 speech, Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson, addressing the challenges of great power competition and ideological enemies such as al Qaeda, outlined measures the United Kingdom to build up its overseas presence and work with allies and partners, including the NATO alliance.

"In an era of 'Great Power' competition we cannot be satisfied simply protecting our own backyard," Williamson said. "The U.K. 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."

Williamson said he does "not underestimate the challenges that this approach brings. But we do start from a position of strength. Our people are already acting around the world from the North Sea to the South Pacific to protect our interests,

and we already benefit from strong international partnerships. But we cannot take such relationships for granted. Our global presence must be persistent…not fitful. Patient…not fickle."

He said that, "From this spring, [Type 23 destroyer] HMS Montrose, along with five other naval vessels, will be permanently based in the [Persian] Gulf using innovative crewing and support methods to keep the ship available for more of the time.

"Today, we also go further," he said. "And I can announce the first operational mission of the HMS Queen Elizabeth will include the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Pacific region, making Global Britain a reality. Significantly, British and American F-35s 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. A world shaped by individual liberty, the rule of law and, of course, the tolerance of others. 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.

"We will also be using our string of global support facilities and military bases more strategically…to consistently project power both hard and soft," he said. "The Duqm

port facilities in Oman are large enough to be able to support our aircraft carriers. The Al Minhad and Al Udeid Air Bases, in the Emirates and Qatar respectively, provide strategically important capabilities. In Bahrain, our naval base and our long-standing Maritime Command make a major contribution to our activities in the region but also beyond. Further afield we already benefit from facilities in Belize, in Brunei, in Singapore as well as our bases in Cyprus, Gibraltar and Ascension Island.

“[The Royal Navy] is exerting British influence through greater forward presence,” he said. “I want to capitalize on that. Investing now to develop a new Littoral Strike Ship concept. And, if successful, we will look to dramatically accelerate their delivery. These globally deployable, multi-role vessels would be able to conduct a wide range of operations, from crisis support to war-fighting. They would support our Future Commando Force: our world-renowned Royal Marines – they’ll be forward deployed, at exceptionally high readiness, and able to respond at a moment’s notice bringing the fight from sea to land.

Williamson said his vision is for the Littoral Strike Ships to form “part of two Littoral Strike Groups complete with escorts, support vessels and helicopters. One would be based East of Suez in the Indo-Pacific and one based West of Suez in the Mediterranean, Atlantic and Baltic. And, if we ever need them to, our two Littoral Strike Ships, our two aircraft carriers, our two amphibious assault ships Albion and Bulwark, and our three Bay-class landing ships can come together in one amphibious task force. This will give us sovereign, lethal, amphibious force. This will be one of the largest and best such forces anywhere in the world.

“I expect the Royal Navy to deploy flexibly, to be capable of being in many places at once and to ensure we have an efficient fleet of warfighting ships, looking at how they can grow both their mass and their lethality,” he said.

Williamson’s entire speech can be viewed here: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/defence-in-global-britain