

News story: Afghan security and stability remains top of UK agenda

The security, development and governance of Afghanistan remains crucial to reducing the terrorist threat to the UK, the Defence Secretary reaffirmed in his first visit to Afghanistan.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

A secure Afghanistan will help keep the streets of Britain safe. Building the security services that will be the foundation of stability and peace in Afghanistan remains top of our agenda and I have seen first-hand the crucial role our brave Armed Forces are playing in realising that vision.

In his meeting with Minister of Defence Bahrami, the Defence Secretary reaffirmed the UK commitment to Afghanistan, citing the continued funding for the Afghanistan National Security Forces, our support for the Afghan National Army Officer Academy (ANAOA) and the recent uplift of UK troops to around 650.

Mr Williamson also met with UK personnel who are based at ANAOA in Qargha, on the western outskirts of Kabul. They are helping to train the next generation of Afghanistan's military leaders through mentoring training staff and instilling the Sandhurst ethos at the academy.

More than 3,000 officers have passed out of the academy since 2013, and, this year, ANAOA has nearly as many female cadets in training as have graduated in total since the academy opened.

The Defence Secretary also met UK troops who lead the Kabul Security Force (KSF), which provides force protection for NATO staff in Kabul. In last five weeks alone, the KSF have undertaken over 2,800 protection journeys and Mr Williamson experienced first-hand the vital role they play, travelling with UK personnel in a Foxhound armoured vehicle.

He also commended their efforts in responding to some of the recent terrorist attacks in Kabul, in which the KSF supported Afghan Security Forces by evacuating guests to safety extracted of guests following the Intercontinental Hotel terrorist attack and provided first aid to Afghan soldiers following an attack on an Afghan Army compound in January.

The UK has played an important role in supporting Afghanistan over the last 16 years and is committed to continuing this in the future. Through the NATO Resolute Support Mission, the support the UK provides on issues such as security, development and governance is crucial to building a stable state and reducing the terrorist threat to the UK.

[News story: UK-US military links strengthened after ministerial visit to Washington DC](#)

Increased co-operation between the nations was agreed in key meetings with the American Secretary of the Army, Mark Esper, and Secretary of the Navy, Richard Spencer.

Russia, cyber warfare and the ongoing fight against Daesh were also on the agenda during discussions in Washington this week.

Minister for Armed Forces, Mark Lancaster, said:

British and American personnel are standing side by side, defending our shared values around the world. We are countering Russian aggression, defeating Daesh and strengthening NATO; and our special relationship will continue to strengthen as we face these evolving threats together.

Both nations are undergoing significant upgrades in defence policy, with the UK currently consulting on its Modernising Defence Programme and the US publishing its National Defense Strategy in January. The two programmes are already closely aligned, with a strong emphasis on modernising forces to tackle the increasing shared threats faced on several fronts, while strengthening international alliances and forging new ones.

The US and UK are the two largest contributors to NATO, and among just five countries pledging at least 2% of their GDP to defence. Both countries have been calling on other nations to match this contribution, ahead of the NATO summit in July.

The UK's defence trade partnership with the US is worth £3billion, including collaboration on several key projects such as the F-35 programme, Unmanned Air Systems and a Common Missile Compartment for UK-US Ballistic Missile Submarines.

An even closer bond is expected after Brexit, as the UK establishes new relationships and trade deals outside of Europe.

The Minister will head to the Arctic Circle this weekend to observe the annual Ice Exercise (ICEX) between the British and US navies, highlighting the capability of both nations' submarines to operate in the most extreme conditions.

Minister for Armed Forces, Mark Lancaster, added:

From partnering on the F-35 programme, to training together in Norway, our Navies and Marines continuously build capability together, and ICEX is another important opportunity for our two nations to show what we can do.

News story: Defence Minister outlines expanded mental health provision for Armed Forces and veterans

Speaking at a conference on mental health at King's College London yesterday, Mr Ellwood also debunked several myths around veterans, saying that ex-forces personnel are not mad, bad and sad, but make a vital contribution to society.

The MOD recently increased funding for mental health provision for military personnel by £20 million over the next ten years.

A new helpline for service personnel has also been established. The new number – 0800 323 4444 is backed up by a major internal communications campaign on mental fitness across the services.

Combat Stress – the leading veterans mental health charity – has been commissioned to run the new helpline service for serving troops 24 hours a day.

The extra £2-million a year for the next ten years to improve mental health services in the Armed Forces is on top of the £20-million per year that is currently committed. The additional money, which brings the total planned spending to £220-million over the next decade, will be put towards an increase in mental health specialists and bolstering existing provision.

The MOD currently has a network of 20 'hub and spoke' mental health centres, comprising of 11 hubs and a further nine teams. Regular visiting clinics are also held at other military centres across the country.

Last year the MOD launched its [Defence Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#) focusing on preventative measures to protect our personnel. MOD also partnered with the Royal Foundation, a charity setup by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry, to improve training and education alongside the strategy to promote mental fitness.

There are a range of services provided by partners working with MOD and through the Armed Forces Covenant, including the NHS, other Government departments and charities which serving personnel, veterans, and their families can access.

You can read the executive summary of the strategy [here](#)

You can read the full strategy [here](#)

News story: Daz beats bullies to lead England's boxers at Commonwealth Games

Sick of unpleasant comments and the threat of violence hanging over him, 10-year-old Daz Chapple took up the contact sport at his local gym in Saltash, Cornwall so he could look after himself.

Now, almost 40 years later, Daz, who is based at Defence, Equipment and Support (DE&S), the government's procurement agency based at MOD Abbey Wood in Bristol, has been selected as Team Leader of Team England.

At the Gold Coast next April he will lead out 12 of the country's most talented amateur boxers, fully expecting them to bring back a haul of medals.

Daz, who lives in Bristol, said:

I came from a tough background, was bullied at school and decided I needed to protect myself.

I saw an advert at my school, which happened to have a national schoolboy champion at the time, and I decided there was no reason I couldn't follow in his footsteps.



Daz recently met the Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson

As soon as he started training, Daz fell in love with the sport and went on to make several national semi-finals in the 51kg division.

At 18 he joined the RAF as an aerial erector and walked straight into the RAF boxing team.

After being posted to Germany for four years he returned to the UK and to the ring but, such was his love for the sport, soon found himself juggling being a boxer, coach and team manager as well as having to fulfil all his commitments in his role with the Armed Forces.

Daz, who recently met the Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson during a visit to DE&S, said:

The military has been very good to me. I put in a lot of extra hours but there are not many places you can work that would allow you the time or flexibility to be able to do this role.

In 2007 Daz applied successfully for a role of England Boxing Team Manager and is now Director England Boxing, (Director of Talent and Performance and GB Talent Commission).

Over the years Daz has witnessed hundreds of bouts – one of which he particularly remembers.

He said:

I actually managed Tyson Fury's first fight as an amateur which took place in the Officers' mess hall at RAF Wyton in Cambridgeshire. He was so tall and had such a long reach the other guy could not get near him. He was fast too which singled him out. He has done well for himself.



Daz Chapple (left) in a boxing match in his youth

For Daz the single moment that stands out is being given the prestigious appointment of Team Leader and being asked to lead out Team England Boxing at the forthcoming Commonwealth Games.

He said:

It is an absolute honour for me. I have dedicated my life to boxing and to be asked to lead the team out in Australia is incredible. It just doesn't get any better.

We have an incredibly strong team and I believe we will be very successful.

Speech: Salisbury nerve agent attack: UK OSCE Permanent Council statement

Mr Chairman,

It is with great regret that I take the floor today to inform the Permanent Council of deeply concerning events that have taken place in the UK over the past days.

On the afternoon of Sunday 4 March, in the beautiful cathedral city of Salisbury in Wiltshire, a father and his daughter, Sergey and Julia Skripal, were taken gravely ill whilst walking through the city centre. Both remain critically ill. A British police officer who was among members of the emergency services responding to the incident also fell seriously ill and has spent the past days in hospital in intensive care. More than 30 other people have also sought medical treatment. As the nature of the Skripals' illness became clear, a major police-led operation sought to identify the poison, locate its source and decontaminate the affected locations and ensure the safety of the public. That operation, and those investigations are ongoing.

As the Prime Minister told the British Parliament, it is clear that Mr Skripal and his daughter had been poisoned with a military-grade nerve agent. I repeat, a military-grade nerve agent.

This agent has been identified by our experts at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, Porton Down, as a type developed in Russia, part of a group of agents known as Novichok. [On Monday, my Prime Minister told Parliament](#) that it was highly likely that Russia, a participating State of the OSCE, was responsible.

Either as a direct act – or because Russia had lost control of a catastrophically damaging military-grade nerve agent.

This assessment was based not only on the positive identification of the nerve agent and our knowledge that the Russian Federation has previously produced this agent and still has the capability to do so, but also on the Russian state's record of state sponsored assassinations, and indeed, public statements indicating that defectors may be seen as legitimate targets.

The British government sought an urgent explanation from Russia, asking Moscow for immediate and full disclosure of the Novichok programme to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Russia's response so far has demonstrated complete disdain for the gravity of these events. There has been no explanation of how this nerve agent came to be used in the UK. And no explanation as to why Russia, a participating State of the OSCE, has an undeclared Chemical Weapon programme – in clear contravention of international law. There is no alternative conclusion other than that the

Russian state was culpable for this heinous act. This represents an unlawful use of force by the Russian Federation in the UK.

Mr Chairman, I need hardly remind the Permanent Council that no state party which has committed to the Chemical Weapons Convention should in any way be linked to, or responsible for, the use of Chemical Weapons. Indeed, only 1 week ago, Russia reported in the FSC the destruction of historic Chemical Weapon stocks. Events of the last week cast significant doubt on that statement.

The Chemical Weapons Convention is not the only international commitment brought into question by this attack, the first offensive use of nerve agent of any sort on European Territory since the Second World War.

This was a grotesque crime, that not only targeted individuals in a particularly barbaric way, but which was perpetrated without regard to the safety of the British emergency services or indeed to local residents and visitors going about their ordinary lives on a Sunday afternoon.

I repeat Mr Chairman, this was an unlawful use of force against the UK.

But it is not simply a bilateral matter. This crime violates the letter and spirit of the Helsinki Final Act. It damages the concept of confidence building this organisation strives to develop. And it undermines the principles on which this organisation is founded.

No participating State of the OSCE should feel comfortable with what happened on the streets of Salisbury. No participating State.

Mr Chairman, police investigations are ongoing, decontamination operations are ongoing and medical care for the victims of this attack is ongoing.

For now, allow me to express my thanks for the many messages of support from friends, allies and partners around this table and for the strong expressions of solidarity from many capitals represented here.

I will close echoing [the words of my Prime Minister](#). This is an affront to the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons. And an affront to the rules-based system on which we depend. We will work with our allies and partners to confront such actions wherever they threaten our security, at home and abroad.

Mr Chairman, please attach this statement to the journal of the day.

Thank you Mr Chairman.

Find out [more about the UK government response to the Salisbury attack](#).