

News story: Defence Secretary welcomes US Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis to the UK for the first time

Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon welcomed Secretary Jim Mattis to London today for his first visit to the UK as US Defense Secretary. They reviewed a number of defence and security issues, including the need for NATO modernisation and increased defence spending by all members, progress in the fight against extremism, including Daesh in Iraq and Syria, and joint equipment and defence trade programmes.

Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon said:

We have no closer friend than the United States and across the globe our nations are standing side by side in defending our values. Together we're showing leadership on the world stage – tackling extremism, standing up to Russian aggression and modernising NATO, making it fitter, faster and more agile.

Sir Michael outlined at today's meeting how Britain is playing a leading role in European and global defence and security, and wants a deep and special economic and security partnership with the EU after the UK leaves. The Defence Secretary confirmed that as of next week, all 800 British troops would be deployed in Estonia as part of NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), alongside over 300 British Army vehicles. And continuing UK and US forces' long history of joint operations, the UK is supporting the US-led eFP in Poland, contributing hundreds of troops and more than 50 vehicles. British armour transporters will be helping to move US tanks across Poland, underlining the depth of UK/US cooperation.

Sir Michael and Secretary Mattis also agreed steps for NATO modernisation, including simpler command structures, and reviewed the pressing need for NATO members to meet their 2% defence spending commitments. The Defence Secretary called on NATO members not meeting the 2% spending commitment to increase their defence budget annually in real terms, in order to demonstrate greater burden sharing.

Both the Defence Secretary and Secretary Mattis reviewed progress in the fight against Daesh and agreed to keep up the campaign momentum, with Iraqi forces liberating more territory from Daesh's tyranny in western Mosul and planning the campaign to isolate and then liberate Raqqa in Syria. Britain and the US are leading the Coalition effort to defeat Daesh in Iraq and Syria, striking extremist positions from the air and training the Iraqi security forces on the ground.

Visiting the UK for the first time in his new role, US Defense Secretary Jim

Mattis said:

I thank Minister Fallon for the very warm welcome to the UK on my first visit as Secretary of Defense. The special relationship is a source of strength for our two nations, standing together in defense of our freedoms. It is demonstrated daily in our military-to-military interactions across a host of domains, and our relationship grows in strength with the mutual respect and friendship we share.

During a press conference at Lancaster House, Sir Michael announced a £90 million investment to support the UK's new F-35 Lightning aircraft. The F-35 programme is a joint undertaking with the US that will deliver cutting-edge aircraft to British and American Armed Forces. This multi-million pound contract, providing maintenance, training and logistic services at RAF Marham in Norfolk – the future home of the jets' squadrons – will sustain hundreds of highly skilled British jobs.

Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon said:

Nothing demonstrates the strength of our relationship better than our joint work on the most advanced combat aircraft in the world – the F-35. The UK is proud to be the future repair hub for all the European jets. This additional investment at RAF Marham will ensure that we have a formidable fighting force that, at a time of growing danger, will help us work with our US partners to promote international peace and security.

In testament to the British skill base, the UK has been chosen by the US F-35 Program Office to be a global repair hub, providing maintenance, overhaul and upgrade services for European F-35s. The deal builds on the strong foundations of Britain's pre-eminent and enduring defence partnership with the US, and will help create hundreds of high-end jobs, safeguard thousands more and be a substantial boost to UK exports.

This new £90 million contract, placed through the F-35 Joint Program Office with Lockheed Martin, in partnership with BAE Systems, will support services being operated out of RAF Marham. The new support services contract comes as the UK gets ready to receive its ninth F-35 aircraft, which will be based at US Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, South Carolina. A further £167 million investment was announced last year for the construction of three new state-of-the-art buildings at the Norfolk base and construction of these facilities is well under way. In March the F-35 also successfully conducted first firing trials using MBDA's Advanced Short Range Air to Air Missile (ASRAAM), marking the first time a British-designed missile has been fired from the F-35.