News story: Foreign Secretary to visit Washington

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson will travel to Washington DC today (Sunday, 6 May) for two days of talks with the US Administration on Iran, North Korea, Syria, and other major international issues.

While in Washington, the Foreign Secretary will meet Vice President Mike Pence and other senior Administration figures, including National Security Advisor John Bolton. He will also have the opportunity to discuss key issues with Congressional foreign policy leaders.

Speaking ahead of his visit, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said:

> On so many of the world's foreign policy challenges the UK and US are in lockstep. We've seen this recently with the response to the poisonings in Salisbury, our strong response to Asad's use of chemical weapons in Syria, and the effort to de-nuclearise North Korea.
>
> The UK, US, and European partners are also united in our effort to tackle the kind of Iranian behaviour that makes the Middle East region less secure – its cyber activities, its support for groups like Hezbollah, and its dangerous missile programme, which is arming Houthi militias in Yemen.

Further information

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Press release: Schools Minister announces boost to computer science teaching

Organisations are invited to run the first ever National Centre of Computing

Science Education, the School Standards Minister Nick Gibb announced today.

The national centre, along with 40 leading schools across the country, will help improve teaching of the computing curriculum and is supported by a new programme which will train up to 8000 computing teachers on the latest digital skills – that is enough to ensure every secondary school in England has a teacher who can support pupils to succeed.

The digital sectors contributed £118 billion to the economy in 2015 and an estimated 1.2 million more people with specialist digital skills are needed by 2022. By ensuring the next generation has the technological skills we need we can help to maintain the UK's position as a leading global digital economy.

This announcement comes as thousands of pupils prepare to sit reformed GCSEs in twenty subjects this year, including computer science. It follows last year's successful introduction of reformed maths and English GCSEs, with 59.1 per cent of pupils achieving a grade 4 or above in these subjects. The new, gold-standard GCSEs are on a par with the best in the world and will help deliver the skilled workforce Britain's industries need.

Standards are rising in schools thanks to these reforms and the hard work of teachers, which has resulted in 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools than 2010.

School Standards Minister Nick Gibb said:

> The fast-paced world of technology is constantly evolving and it is important that our computer science teachers are trained in the very latest digital skills.
>
> This programme will give teachers the subject knowledge and support they need to guide their pupils through the new computing curriculum. The knowledge pupils will gain in this subject at GCSE and A level will help employers to be able to recruit the skilled workforce they need, helping to build a Britain that is fit for the future.
>
> On Monday 14 May, pupils will start sitting the new computer science GCSE for the first time after working towards it since 2016. This qualification has replaced the ICT GCSE and now includes more challenging content, such as coding and computer programming. This is to ensure that pupils that take this GCSE are better prepared for further education, higher education and beyond.

Today's announcement follows on from the Autumn Budget, during which £84 million was committed to upskill computer science teachers. The National Centre of Computing Education will be a major part of this commitment, providing resources at primary and secondary level. Linked to this centre will be a national network of 40 school-led Computing Hubs where teachers will be able to access specialist training which will benefit pupils.

Some of the funding will also be used for an A- level support programme. This will set out to improve the quality of teaching in AS and A level computer science, and increase students' knowledge and understanding so they are better prepared for further study and employment in digital and technology roles.

This announcement also looks to fulfil one of the aims of the Industrial Strategy, which is to invest in maths, digital and technical education and to help generate well paid, highly skilled jobs across the country. According to the government's digital strategy, digital sectors contributed £118 billion to the economy in 2015 and exports of digital goods and services now amount to over £50 billion. Many jobs also now have a digital element, and it is predicted that within 20 years 90% of all jobs will require some element of digital skills.

Today sees the process of finding a supplier begin, and work on the National Centre is expected to start during autumn 2018, with the first training available in the 2018/19 academic year.

Press release: Earthquakes on Mars

A new mission to Mars involving UK science will be the first to study the heart of the Red Planet and measure 'Marsquakes' from its surface.

The NASA InSight mission, which stands for Interior Exploration using Seismic Investigations, Geodesy and Heat Transport, is due to launch from California aboard a United Launch Alliance Atlas V rocket at 12.05pm (BST) today (Saturday 5 May).

The InSight Lander will use cutting-edge instruments to delve beneath the surface and investigate the interior of Mars to improve our understanding of how such planets formed. It will also study tectonic activity and meteorite impacts, both of which could provide valuable knowledge about these events on Earth.

The UK Space Agency has invested £4 million in one of the key instruments onboard; the short period Seismometer (SEIS-SP). This will be on the surface of Mars to measure seismic waves from Marsquakes. Scientists expect to detect anywhere between a dozen and a hundred of these tremors up to 6.0 on the Richter scale over the course of two years.

Sam Gyimah, Science Minister, said:

> The UK is playing an important role in this exciting mission to unlock the deepest secrets of our nearest neighbour in the solar system. An instrument that started life in a London university

> laboratory will end it on the surface of Mars detecting quakes and meteor strikes for the first time.
>
> It’s a great example of the importance of international collaboration and our work with the space sector as part of our Industrial Strategy, to ensure the UK remains at the forefront of pioneering science and exploration.

Prof Tom Pike from Imperial College London is leading a team with Dr Simon Calcutt from Oxford University and support from STFC RAL Space, to the work on SEIS-SP.

Prof Tom Pike said:

> It’s been enormously challenging to put together such a small sensor with the performance we need to detect Marsquakes. We’ve had the support of the UK Space Agency, and their considerable patience. Now we finally get to see our microseismometers leave the launch pad, next stop Mars.

The spacecraft is due to arrive on the surface of Mars on 26 November. The mission will conduct six science investigations on and below the surface of Mars to uncover the evolutionary history that shaped all of the rocky planets in the inner solar system.

The UK instrument will work together with seismometers from France, as well as major contributions from Switzerland, Germany and the US. Other instruments on board include RISE, a precision radio tracking of the lander that can determine the direction and motion of the rotation of Mars and the HP3 (Heat Flow and Physical Properties Probe) which will study heat flow by embedding a temperature sensor under the surface of Mars.

The UK space sector is playing a leading role in efforts to explore the solar system with additional collaborative projects including the ExoMars mission which will search for evidence of life on Mars using a rover on the surface and a spacecraft in orbit above it. The rover is designed and built in Britain by Airbus for launch in 2020 and the spacecraft recently returned the first photos from its new orbit showing an ice-filled, Martian crater.

The UK Space Agency, University of Leicester and Airbus are also involved in a mission to the closest planet to the Sun, Mercury, called BepiColombo, which is due to launch later this year.

The InSight launch will be streamed live by NASA

News story: Royal Navy gets first unmanned minesweeping system

Following a period of successful trials the demonstrator system could go on to be used by the Royal Navy in the future to defeat the threat of modern digital mines.

The system has been designed and manufactured by Atlas Elektronik UK in Dorset, under a £13 million contract with the Ministry of Defence which has sustained around 20 jobs and created 15 new jobs with the company.

Defence Minister Guto Bebb said:

> This autonomous minesweeper takes us a step closer to taking our crews out of danger and allowing us to safely clear sea lanes of explosives, whether that's supporting trade in global waters and around the British coastline, or protecting our ships and shores. Easily transported by road, sea and air, the high-tech design means a small team could put the system to use within hours of it arriving in theatre. We are investing millions in innovative technology now, to support our military of the future.

The system's innovative and modernised technology has the ability to defeat today's digital sea mines which can detect and target military ships passing overhead. The sweeper system, which features a "sense and avoid" capability, could also work together with other similar autonomous systems for the common goal of making our waters safer.

The project also aims to demonstrate the viability of an unmanned system that can safely and successfully clear mines and which is designed to be operated from a land or ship-based control station and can be deployed from a suitable ship or port.

Over the last four months, the system has been put through its paces by Atlas Elektronik and Defence Equipment and Support team members and the Royal Navy's Maritime Autonomous Systems Trials Team (MASTT).

The system was tested against a number of performance requirements, for example, how well it cleared mines, whether the autonomous system could successfully avoid obstacles and the overall system performance.

Brigadier Jim Morris Royal Marines – Assistant Chief of the Naval Staff in Maritime Capability, and Senior Responsible Officer for the Mine Counter Measures and Hydrographic Capability (MHC) programme said:

> The Mine Countermeasures and Hydrographic Capability Combined Influence Minesweeping system is the Royal Navy's first fully

> autonomous capability demonstrator and paves the way for the introduction of this technology across the full range of maritime capabilities.
>
> Combined Influence Minesweeping is a critical component of the Mine Countermeasures capability. This autonomous system will restore the Royal Navy's sweep capability, enabling it to tackle modern digital mines that may not otherwise be discovered in challenging minehunting conditions.
>
> This autonomous sweep system represents a fundamental step in the Navy's transition to autonomous offboard systems to counter the threat posed to international shipping by the sea mine; we look forward to commencing demonstration of the associated minehunting system in 2019.

The handover of the system to the Royal Navy is a significant milestone for the Mine Countermeasures and Hydrographic Capability (MHC) programme, which aims to de-risk maritime autonomous systems and introduce these new technologies into the Royal Navy.

Director Ships Support Neal Lawson, of the MOD's procurement organisation, Defence Equipment and Support, said:

> The autonomous minesweeper offers a commander the ability to defeat mines that cannot be countered by current hunting techniques and significantly reduces the risk to crew members in pressured and time-constrained operations.
>
> The system can offer greater flexibility and upgradability, allowing the Royal Navy to respond better to the sea-mine threat in the long-term and operate more effectively around the world and I'm therefore delighted to be back here at Bincleaves, where I started my MOD career 29 years ago, to mark the handover of this critical programme.

An autonomous minesweeper system that can safely clear sea lanes of mines has been handed over to the Royal Navy, Defence Minister Guto Bebb has announced. Crown copyright.

The system will now undergo a series of more detailed trials with the Royal Navy.

The Royal Navy has a proud history of minesweeping, dating from World War One when even the likes of fishing trawlers were converted for use, dragging a chain from the vessel to clear German mines. Today, with far more sophisticated equipment, the service is still called upon to clear the waters of ordnance and maintains a world-leading role in minehunting, training alongside allies in the Mediterranean and the Gulf.

The MOD has committed 1.2% of the £36bn defence budget, supported by a dedicated £800m Innovation Fund, to cutting-edge science and technology.

An autonomous minesweeper system that can safely clear sea lanes of mines has been handed over to the Royal Navy, Defence Minister Guto Bebb has announced. Crown copyright.

News story: Topics for discussions on the Future Framework at forthcoming meetings