

THE TIMES

British pact with Oman allows aircraft carriers into new port

21.02.19 Richard Spencer

Britain will today sign a military pact with the Gulf sultanate of Oman, as Gavin Williamson, the defence secretary, implements the next part of his ambitious plan to send the armed forces “east of Suez” after Brexit.

The defence pact will allow Britain’s new aircraft carriers to dock in the port the country is developing in the town of Duqm, south of the capital, Muscat. It is the only naval facility in the Gulf capable of taking them. Officials describe the new pact as a closer alliance than Nato. It comes after the reopening of a Royal Navy base in Bahrain last year, which has anti-mine vessels permanently stationed there but is not large enough for a carrier.

The deal comes at a time when tensions are rising in the Gulf as President Trump reimposes sanctions on Iran. Britain’s normally close relations with its other principal regional allies, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, are also under strain thanks to the jailing last year in the UAE of Matthew Hedges, a PhD student, and to the killing of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul.

Defence officials point to the older military relationship with Oman, which goes back to the 19th century. The SAS was used to suppress rebellions in the 1950s and 1970s, and to put the present Sultan Qaboos in power in place of his father 49 years ago. Unlike the UAE, Oman has continued to hire British army officers on loan for its forces and Britain has reciprocated, with five Omani officers now serving in the UK army.

Mr Williamson described the defence relationship as “incredibly close”. “Gulf security is our security, and it is crucial that we expand our horizons and become a truly global Britain after we leave the European Union,” he said. “By maintaining stability in this region we are helping to keep Britain safe.”

Mr Williamson’s strategic ventures as defence secretary since November 2017 have been controversial. He angered Beijing by saying that the carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth’s maiden voyage would be to assert international rights of passage in waters claimed by China in the South China Sea.

Last September HMS Albion, an amphibious assault ship, sailed through the Spratly Islands, which are disputed by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia. The Chinese sent a frigate to approach the vessel and it was “buzzed” by helicopters. In the Gulf the main threat is perceived to be Iran, which continues to threaten Israel and in turn is threatened by Mr Trump’s sanctions.

However, Britain is also concerned by the continuing diplomatic spat between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain on the one hand and Qatar on the other, which was at one stage feared to be about to spill into open conflict. Oman has clashed with the UAE and Saudi Arabia over their role in the war in Yemen, which it opposes. Oman has been persuaded partly by the British to act on arms smuggling through its territory to the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Britain has backed the Saudis and the UAE in the war in Yemen, but is pressing for a settlement. That led to a clash in November between Jeremy Hunt, the foreign secretary, and Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince. Mr Hunt also clashed with the UAE’s de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, over Mr Hedges. A visit also in November by Mr Williamson to the Musandam peninsula, an outpost of Oman surrounded by UAE territory, was interpreted as a strong statement of support for Oman in the face of its disagreements with the UAE.

The new port at Duqm will also house an army logistics and training base, Britain’s first permanent army base east of Suez since 1971.