

Keeping the Empire Running: Britain's Global Military Footprint

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*A few nostalgic types still believe that the Union Jack continues to flutter to sighs and reverence over outposts of the world, from the tropics to the desert. They would be right, if only to a point. Britain, it turns out, has a rather expansive global reach when it comes to bases, military installations and testing sites. While not having the obese heft and lumbering brawn of the United States, it makes a good go of it. Globally, the UK military [has a presence](#) in 145 sites in 42 countries. Such figures tally with Ian Cobain's prickly [observation](#) in *The History Thieves*: that the British were the only people "perpetually at war."*

Phil Miller's rich [overview](#) of Britain's military footprint for *Declassified UK* shows it to be heavy. "The size of the global military presence is far larger than previously thought and is likely to mean that the UK has the second largest military network in the world, after the United States." The UK military, for instance, has a presence in five countries in the Asia-Pacific: naval facilities in Singapore; garrisons in Brunei, drone testing facilities in Australia; three facilities in Nepal; a quick reaction force in Afghanistan. Cyprus remains a favourite with 17 military installations. In Africa, British personnel can be found in Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Mali. Then come the ever dubious ties to Arab monarchies.

The nature of having such bases is to be kind to your host, despite him being theocratic, barking mad, or an old fashioned despot with fetishes. Despite the often silly pronouncements by British policy makers that they take issue with authoritarians, exceptions numerous in number abound. The UK has never had a problem with authoritarians it can work with or despots it can coddle. A closer look at such relations usually reveal the same ingredients: capital, commerce, perceptions of military necessity. The approach to Oman, a state marked by absolute rule, is a case in point.

Since 1798, Britain has had a hand in ensuring the success, and the survivability, of the House of Al Said. On September 12, UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace [announced](#) that a further £23.8 million would go to enhancing the British Joint Logistics Support Base at Duqm port, thereby tripling "the size of the existing UK base and help facilitate Royal Navy deployments to the Indian Ocean". The Ministry of Defence also went so far as to describe a "renewal" of a "hugely valuable relationship," despite the signing of a new Joint Defence Agreement in February 2019.

The agreement had been one of the swan song acts of the ailing Sultan Qaboos bin Said, whose passing this year was genuinely mourned in British political circles. Prime Minister Boris Johnson [called him](#) "an exceptionally wise and respected leader who will be missed enormously." Papers of record wrote in praise of a reformer and a developer. "The longest

serving Arab ruler," [observed](#) a sycophantic column in *The Guardian*, "Qaboos was an absolute monarch, albeit a relatively benevolent and popular one."

The same Sultan, it should be said, [had little fondness](#) for freedom of expression, assembly and association, encouraged the arrests and harassment of government critics and condoned sex discrimination. But he was of the "one of us" labels: trained at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, an unwavering Anglophile, installed on the throne by Britain in the 1970 palace coup during the all but forgotten Dhofar Rebellion. "Strategically," Cobain [reminds us](#), "the Dhofar war was one of the most important conflicts of the 20th century, as the victors could expect to control the Strait of Hormuz and the flow of oil." The British made sure their man won.

Public mention of greater British military involvement in foreign theatres can be found, though they rarely make front page acts. The business of projecting such power, especially in the Britannic model, should be careful, considered, even gnomic. Britain, for instance, is rallying to the US-led call to contain the Yellow Peril in the Asia Pacific, a nice reminder to Beijing that old imperial misdeeds should never be a bar to repetition. The head of the British Army, General Sir Mark Carleton-Smith, [spoke](#) in September about there being "a market for a more persistent presence from the British Army (in Asia). It's an area that saw a much more consistent Army presence in the Eighties, but with 9/11 we naturally receded from it." The time had come "to redress that imbalance".

The UK Chief of Defence Staff, General Sir Nick Carter, [prefers](#) to be more enigmatic about the "future of Global Britain." To deal with an "ever more complex and dynamic strategic context," he suggests the "Integrated Operating Concept". Britain had to "compete below the threshold of war in order to deter war, and to prevent one's adversaries from achieving their objectives in fait accompli strategies."

Gone are the old thuggeries of imperial snatch and grab; evident are matters of flexibility in terms of competition. "Competing involves a campaign posture that includes continuous operating on our terms and in places of our choosing." This entails a thought process involving "several dimensions to escalate and deescalate up and down multiple ladders – as if it were a spider's web." The general attempts to illustrate this gibberish with the following example: "One might actively constrain in the cyber domain to protect critical national infrastructure in the maritime Domain."

In 2017, there were already more than just murmurings from Johnson, then Foreign Secretary, and Defence Secretary Michael Fallon, that a greater British presence in the Asia-Pacific was warranted. Fallon was keen to stress the reasons for deeper involvement, [listing them](#) to a group of Australian journalists. "The tensions have been rising in the region, not just from the tests by North Korea but also escalating tension in the South China Sea with the building program that's gone there on the islands and the need to keep those routes open."

With such chatter about the China threat you could be forgiven for believing that British presence in the Asia-Pacific was minimal. But that would ignore, for instance, the [naval logistics base](#) at Singapore's Sembawang Wharf, permanently staffed by eight British military personnel with an eye on the busy Malacca Strait. A more substantial presence can also be found in the Sultanate of Brunei, comprising an infantry battalion of Gurkhas and an Army Air Corps Flight of Bell 212 helicopters. The MOD is [particularly keen](#) on the

surroundings, as they offer “tropical climate and terrain ... well suited to jungle training”.

Over the next four years, the UK military can expect to get an extra £16.5 billion – a 10% increase in funding and a fond salute to militarists. “I have decided that the era of cutting our defence budget must end, and ends now,” [declared](#) Johnson. “Our plans will safeguard hundreds of thousands of jobs in the defence industry, protecting livelihoods across the UK and keeping the British people safe.”

The prime minister was hoping to make that announcement accompanied by the “Integrated Defence and Security Review” long championed by his now departed chief special adviser, Dominic Cummings. Cummings might [have been ejected](#) from the gladiatorial arena of Downing Street politics, but the ideas in the Review are unlikely to buck old imperial trends. At the very least, there will be a promise of more military bases to reflect a posture General Carter [describes](#) rather obscurely as “engaged and forward deployed”.

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