

Defence and Security Lecture

Mansion House – 20 October 2025

Rt. Hon John Healey MP- Secretary of State for Defence

My Lord Mayor, Lady Mayoress, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have to say it's a privilege to deliver this year's Defence and Security Lecture here at Mansion House.

It's a huge privilege also to be the first Defence Secretary to do so.

I'd like to begin by thanking the Lord Mayor as he enters the final weeks in office for all that he has done to reinforce the bond between our institutions.

Not only has he doubled the number of Livery companies who have signed the Armed Forces Covenant but he's personally opened new investment opportunities for UK Defence because of his actions, because of his commitment, and I am sincerely grateful Alastair to you for that.

Let me also thank the City of London Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Association, the Liveries, and the city businesses for the many ways you help our incredible Armed Forces community.

And to the Reservists with us this evening, as citizen-sailors, soldiers and aviators you provide the numbers to sustain our Armed Forces, you provide the expertise to enhance them and you provide the bridge which binds them to society.

And on behalf of our nation, on behalf of the millions of people who will never have a chance to thank you themselves, we thank you for that.

I would like – if I may – to single out one Lance Bombardier in the Royal Artillery for particular praise, the Lady Mayoress.

I did a number of breakfasts and one breakfast that I did with the Lord Mayor was in the salon next door and Florence was there. Not just participating in discussions as she always does but she was there alongside the defence industry and investors, she was there with a body armour and a selection of drones on this table for the guests at the breakfast to test out their skills. She's done it again tonight so if any of you fancy having a go at flying drones you can do so around the salon and Florence will help tutor you.

A great example of the many people and companies in the Square Mile who go the extra mile to support our military and we thank you.

We need more businesses like those in the City who are prepared to meet their responsibilities for our national security.

And I urge any of you as company leaders here tonight to look at what more you can do to support your people to join, to contribute to our Reserves.

Ultimately, it is our people who win wars, people who demonstrate deterrence, it is people who keep the peace.

We are fortunate in this country to have the very finest Armed Forces.

In the years ahead, we will be asking more of those service personnel, and they have a right to expect their Government, supported by the nation, to do more for them.

So, we will continue to renew the nation's contract with those who serve and the families who support them – and we will show our personnel, our forces families, our veterans that we are on their side.

In my first day in the job, our then Chief of the Defence Staff, Tony Radakin told me I'd been appointed Defence Secretary at what he described as: "the most extraordinary time for defence and security" in his 35 years' of service.

And that of course was before the Iran-Israel war dragged the Middle East close to the brink.

It was before the Chinese warships conducted their unprecedented circumnavigation of Australia.

It was before armed conflict broke out between India and Pakistan, with both firing at each other's nuclear sites.

It was before Putin called on North Korean troops for assistance on the front line against Ukraine.

It was before European nations had forcefully – and rightly – challenged by President Trump to shoulder more of Europe's security.

Putin's full-scale invasion is now in day 1,335 - a war that he thought he'd win within a week.

Instead he's lost over a million troops. 40 per cent of his total government spending now goes on the military and he's been forced to call on North Korea, Iran and China for help.

Nonetheless, Russian aggression has escalated. It's extended even further West.

Each month, Ukraine suffers more drones being launched in attacked.

And last month, we saw 19 cross the Polish border- days later, Russian jets violated Estonia's airspace while at the same time, Russia mounted a concerted campaign to subvert Moldovan elections.

Here at home, we continue to defend ourselves daily against threats that range from the seabed to cyberspace.

We will always do what's needed to defend British people and as we speak, we are developing new legal powers to bring down unidentified drones over UK military bases.

This is undeniably a new era of threat.

The world is more unstable, more uncertain, more dangerous.

And not since the end of the Second World War has Europe's security been at such risk of state-on-state conflict.

So this new era of threat demands a new era for defence.

This is now an age for hard power, strong alliances and sure diplomacy.

I'm proud to be part of a government – led by a Prime Minister – that knows that our first duty is to defend the nation and keep our citizens safe.

That recognises – as Keir Starmer has said – the role of defence and security and I quote directly "Not as one priority amongst many others. But as the central organising principle of government... the pillar on which everything else stands or falls."

I'm proud that in this first year in office, we have stepped up to start to meet the challenges of this new era.

With the largest increase in defence spending since the end of the Cold War.

With a new NATO benchmark of five percent of GDP spent on defence and security by 2035.

The largest pay increase for our armed forces in over 20 years to turn around the fall in Armed Forces numbers.

And the first-of-its-kind Strategic Defence Review which sets out our vision to make Britain safer: secure at home, strong abroad.

The SDR signifies a landmark shift in our deterrence and defence- moving to warfighting readiness to deter threats and to strengthen security in the Euro-Atlantic.

Drawing lessons from Ukraine to put the UK at the leading edge of defence innovation and to build Britain's industrial base.

As I look ahead to the rest of this decade our task, in this new age of hard power is to secure peace in our continent and to forge stronger deterrence and resilience... a New Deal for European security.

And tonight, I want to set out for you what I see as the hallmarks of this New Deal... how we truly fight together as Allies... how we advance our advantage through innovation... and how we invest for the future.

But let me begin by the most urgent task at hand... and that is Ukraine.

Despite Putin's rhetoric, he still shows no real signs of relenting in his determination to wipe a sovereign nation off the map.

Yet the Ukrainians continue to resist, with great courage- military and civilians alike.

I am proud that Britain and our commitment to supporting Ukraine is strong and will stand for as long as it takes.

I am proud too that our country- the UK- is united for Ukraine.

I was in Opposition on day one of Putin's invasion.

There was never a doubt in my mind – or Keir's – that Britain should step up our support Ukraine in that moment.

We are stepping up further.

This year, we will provide the highest level of military aid to Ukraine ever- £4.5 billion this year alone.

We've taken over the leadership of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group, alongside Germany.

In the eight months since we did that in February, we've successfully raised pledges of over £50 billion in military help to Ukraine.

And we have got to recognise as well the fact that the British public have shown that our nation remains united for Ukraine.

Taking in 167,000 Ukrainians through that Homes for Ukraine programme... thousands of Ukrainian children in British schools- and a sight that I will never forget: that small group of Ukrainian service personnel joining our VE Day 80 parade. As they marched with enormous pride down the Mall, they did so to deafening cheers and applause from both sides and the platform that greeted them outside Buckingham Palace.

That is why President Zelenskyy calls the UK his “closest ally”.

It is also why Putin ranks Britain as his number one enemy.

And as his aggression grows – both in Ukraine and beyond – Britain and our NATO allies stand more unified, and stronger.

And we will act. Within days of Russia’s drone incursions into Poland, British Typhoon jets began flying air defence missions over Poland and that eastern flank.

Within weeks, we will now start to produce jointly in the UK- Ukrainian ‘Octopus’ interceptor drones.

Within months, we will establish the new UK Drone Centre.

And within this Parliament, we will double investment in drones and other autonomous systems to more than £4 billion.

For Ukraine, our mission is simple. To support the fight today. To secure peace for tomorrow. And to stand ready to step up still further.

Over the past six months, you have seen the UK do just that – to lead the creation of a Coalition of the Willing alongside France.

200 military planners from more than 30 nations developing detailed plans, that in the event of a ceasefire we can send in a ‘Multinational Force Ukraine’.

A force to help secure the skies, secure the seas, a force to help train Ukrainian forces to defend their nation.

So, as President Trump leads the push for peace, here in Europe, we are ready to lead the work to secure it in the long-term.

For our Armed Forces, I am already reviewing the readiness levels and accelerating millions of pounds of funding to prepare for any possible deployment to Ukraine.

Because a sovereign Ukraine is important to the security for us all.

We’ve already seen now the experience and ingenuity of Ukrainians starting to contribute and help train alongside NATO exercises. We’ve seen Ukrainian experts placed alongside NATO in combat exercises, we’ve seen their counter-drone experts placed alongside UK experts to help Denmark defend when they hosted the recent European Political Community.

That is why I told my counterparts in NATO last week when we had our Defence Ministers meeting – a secure Europe needs a strong Ukraine.

A battle-smart, battle-tested Ukraine will be in the vanguard of future European defence and deterrence.

That’s our challenge on Ukraine. Let me turn then to alliances.

When I became Defence Secretary just over a year ago there was no Coalition of the Willing... there is now. There was no E5 defence ministers... there is now. There was no UK-EU Security and Defence Partnership... there is now.

There was no UK leadership of the Ukraine Contact Group... no landmark Trinity House Defence Agreement with Germany...no reboot of the Lancaster House Treaty with France... there is now.

I have always believed that Britain's strategic strength comes from our Allies and that Britain serve as democracy's most reliable ally.

It was this principle that laid the foundation for the European security order forged by Ernest Bevin – the great post-War British Foreign Secretary.

A principle which found its fullest expression in NATO.

NATO wasn't delivered fully baked. NATO was an undertaking of extraordinary scale and vision that was hard fought and hard won.

Bevin spent years assembling the shield from behind which a safer, more prosperous world could be built.

Today, we inherit the security of its strength but we also inherit the responsibility to strengthen it still further.

NATO is that simple profound promise that we will never fight alone.

Over the coming years, we will develop a greater readiness to fight together, to deter together.

Our historic Norway deal is a blueprint for this.

Not only is this £10 billion export contract – the biggest British warship deal ever, it marks the birth of a joint fleet of submarine hunters operating in the north Atlantic and the High North – there to protect NATO's northern flank. And it is underpinned by a deep new defence agreement – that we will formally sign in the coming weeks.

It will set new standards for how Allies can work together because the threats that we face demand that we don't just coordinate our Forces, they require us to be ready to combine our forces.

And over the next 5 years, we will make this a hallmark of our New Deal for European security. Joint operations with interoperable standards... deploying combined forces to deter together... to strengthen our Alliances, strengthen NATO, and to strengthen our deterrence to face this new era.

Let me turn then to innovation.

Because keeping NATO strong means keeping us ahead of our adversaries in the unending race for technological superiority.

Bevin again once declared: "We've got to have this thing over here, whatever it costs... we've got to have the bloody Union Jack on top of it."

And the "thing" to which he referred of course was the Atomic Bomb.

The decision taken – nearly 80 years ago – to pursue the most advanced weaponry and most advanced technology of its age meant Britain has maintained this ultimate, unbroken protection for ourselves and our Allies.

And I'd argue our task now is no less demanding.

Our Strategic Defence Review sets out how we will draw lessons from the war in Ukraine. A war which has demonstrated that a nation's Armed Forces are only as strong as the industry and the investors and the innovators that stand behind them.

Every square inch of the modern battlefield is monitored, every second of the fight.

Drones now account for 80 per cent of casualties in that war in Ukraine.

And this shift in battlefield technology is only accelerating.

Rapid advances in AI, in machine learning, in quantum computing and autonomy will change the nature of war at a rate that is faster than at any point in our human history.

While the mass proliferation of Chinese technology to other countries carries a heavy threat that that technology will be used against us.

The next war may well not start in the air, on land or at sea but across cyberspace – or indeed in space itself.

So we must not, we cannot, be sentimental about the traditional kit but we must invest in the technology of the future.

We need the power of drones, of AI, and autonomy to complement the ‘heavy metal’ of tanks and artillery and planes.

Plans simply to ‘modernise’ our Armed Forces will fall short.

The SDR stressed instead the imperative to transform our defence.

A process that we have already begun.

We’re driving the deepest defence reforms in 50 years.

We’ve launched UK Defence Innovation, backed by a ringfenced annual budget of at least £400 million.

And we’ve committed to spending 10 per cent of our equipment budget on novel technologies, starting this year.

Because the ‘brains race’ in innovation is more important now than at any time since the white heat of post-War technology equipped the UK with our nuclear deterrent.

I want now to put the UK at the leading edge of defence innovation, making defence the engine for economic growth, making Britain safer and making Britain’s Armed Forces the most innovating military in NATO.

None of this can be done of course without investment.

And that security order built in the aftermath of the Second World War produced the longest period of great power peace since the Roman Empire.

Yet the ‘long peace’ that we enjoyed gave rise to a collective complacency.

When the Ukraine conflict began in 2014, only three NATO nations were spending two per cent on defence.

At the time of Putin’s full-scale invasion, that figure had risen but to only seven.

The UK has always met our NATO spending commitments and with this government, we always will.

But to be plain about the facts, during the first five years of austerity from 2010, the day to day defence budget was slashed by nearly 20 per cent.

A legacy our government confronted immediately by boosting defence investment this year – in our first year- by £5 billion.

And by meeting the pledge we made in our manifesto to spend 2.5 per cent of GDP on defence but doing so three years earlier than anyone expected.

So, it is right that America has called on Europe to do more, to spend more, to meet the security demands of a more dangerous world.

And it is right that Europe has responded. Through the E5, through the Joint Expeditionary Force, through the Ukraine Defence Contact Group, through the Coalition of the Willing... Europe is stepping up.

And at last week's defence meeting in NATO, it became clear that we now expect that all NATO nations will meet that two per cent spending on defence this year.

But we have to step up further and we will.

At the Hague Summit, 32 nations – all the allies of NATO- made a promise to one another to spend five per cent of GDP on core defence and national security by 2035.

And if anyone looks at those figures and thinks deterrence is costly, take a look at war. All told, the UK Government has so far committed up to £21.8 billion in support of Ukraine – and rising.

A significant sum but the biggest impact for Britain has been the estimated additional £90 billion on the gas costs of this country because of Russian aggression.

So, while we look at the costs of action, we must also be clear about the costs of inaction, and we must be confident about the rewards of acting.

And we are already starting to see some of those rewards. So we've signed 1,000 major contracts since the election in July 2024, 1,000 major contracts, 86 per cent of them with British-based businesses.

We've seen £1.7 billion in foreign direct investment committed into our defence sector in the last year – that's over eight times more than the figure for the year before.

And last month, to build on the progress made, we published our Defence Industrial Strategy – a plan supported by £800 million in this Parliament to invest to strengthen our security and grow our economy as well.

A plan to make defence an engine for economic growth in every nation and every region of the UK.

A plan for a 'defence dividend' from the increased defence investment measured in good jobs, new skills and opportunities.

One year into this government we've done a lot – but I tell you there's a great deal more to do.

I want Britain to become now the best place to invest and to grow a defence business.

So, in the coming years, this is how this New Deal for European security will take shape- a secure and sovereign Ukraine... a stronger, more integrated NATO... European nations innovating at war time pace to meet our security needs.

Britain leading from the front.

While our values are unchanging, our policies and ambitions must change.

Business we've done before simply will not cut it.

Because years ahead will be defined not just by periodic coordination of allied militaries, but by the readiness to deter in combination.

Not just by keeping Ukraine in the fight today but by securing the peace tomorrow.

Not just the modernisation but the transformation of our Armed Forces.

Not just fighting across one domain but integrating to fight in all.

Not just reacting to the conflicts of the day but deterring them from happening tomorrow.

So I can sum up our duty in government in simple terms: to meet the challenges in this new era of threat to forge a new era for European security.