

Baroness Goldie looks forward to a safer and more prosperous future for Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkans, December 2021

It's a privilege to be here in Sarajevo and, may I say as the first UK Defence Minister to visit this country for a decade, it's a trip that has been long overdue.

It was also a great honour to represent the British Government at the Armed Forces Day commemoration earlier this morning, where we celebrated the formation of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina some 16 years ago.

It was fantastic to reflect on the inspirational way different communities came together to build a trusted and respected organisation, that remains a true partner to the UK to this day.

The key takeaway from the event was a profound sense of hope, because despite the conflict of the past, we came up with a powerful way forward... and that was partnership.

Partnership between separate communities and nations based on a shared commitment to a set of deeply held principles – tolerance, justice and a desire for stability.

So, in the aftermath of war we saw the UN, NATO and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe come together to ensure stability in the Western Balkans – in which the UK played a prominent part.

We saw the setting up of a Peace Implementation Council with UK personnel permanently stationed at NATO HQ in Sarajevo, and the NATO KFOR mission to support security in Kosovo.

Crucially, we saw partnership embodied in this impressive Peace Support Operations Training Centre which the UK opened back in 2003.

In the past 18 years it has proved a catalyst for cooperation. Not just by providing world-class peace support and humanitarian training and education, but also by bringing countries together – as evidenced by the presence of our friends from Serbia, Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia.

As I said to General Masovic [Ma-sho-vitch] this morning, the UK's commitment to Bosnia and Herzegovina is ironclad.

That's why our militaries routinely train together, share expertise and enhance their collective capacity to defend our people.

We're also finding our cooperation is having a broader global impact. At a

time when women and girls are finding themselves on the frontline of conflict, you are playing a major role in helping provide greater protection, whether hosting a Women, Peace and Security Conference in 2019 or encouraging more women to join your forces.

This positive action, along with our enduring partnerships, is going to be as important as ever in this new era of global competition and sub-threshold threats.

Indeed, as our Integrated Review set out earlier this year, the days of binary states of peace and war are long gone. Instead, we are faced with a growing array of threats designed to sow discord and confusion, whether it's cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns, or the use of proxy forces and drone swarms.

Our review was also clear that partnerships of all kinds are going to be crucial to defending our way of life and securing our prosperity in the coming years.

So, while it would be easy to look at today's world with a sense of despair, anyone who comes to this centre will return with a renewed optimism.

Who of those who went through the trauma of conflict here would imagine that just a few years later lives would have been rebuilt, communities revived and the region as a whole flourishing?

And that they would have a single, united armed forces, prepared to defend its people from whatever threats come their way?

In an uncertain era, it is our strong partnerships that provide the greatest hope for a safer and more prosperous future for this country and this region.