

Bolstering defence budget is not just about soldiers – trade will prosper too

I am often asked, from across the political spectrum “what is defence for?” as well as “what do we get for our money?”. But just because much of what we do is hidden from plain sight doesn’t mean that we don’t make an enormous global difference. Today the Royal Fleet Auxiliary ship, RFA Mounts Bay, is providing disaster relief to the Bahamas and providing vital reassurance to our allies in the UK’s overseas territories.

In the Strait of Hormuz, four Royal Navy warships, including the frigate Montrose and destroyer Defender, are on duty protecting British-flagged merchant ships from Iranian aggression.

All the while our cyber warriors on the online frontier are defending our systems from attack. So we should be tremendously proud of the brave men and women of the Armed Forces who provide our security across the globe day in, day out.

Yet, as the first former regular soldier for many years to lead the Ministry of Defence, I am also well aware that we only succeed because we invest.

We are currently Europe’s biggest defence spender by far and we have an impressive future force coming on line. It will include world-class, fifth-generation F35 stealth fighters, our two mighty carriers – one already bound for the United States to take part in operational trials – Dreadnought-class submarines and advanced armoured vehicles.

But this is about much more than just the men and women in uniform. Behind our military operations and armed services sits a supportive and innovative defence industry that sustains more than 260,000 jobs and last year exported £20 billion of aerospace and security equipment to our allies around the world. Next week’s Defence and Security Equipment International exhibition will showcase our world-class talent across all domains – not just air, land and sea but the evolving disciplines of security and joint operations.

It will act as a reminder, too, that not only does our defence industry strengthen our precious union, but it spreads wealth the length and breadth of our country.

However, we cannot afford complacency. The threats against our nation are growing. We’re not just contending with an increase in state competition and Daesh terrorists directing murder on British streets, but with cyber criminals who lurk in the shadows. That’s why the decision by the Prime Minister to significantly increase the defence budget is so important.

Defence cannot just be the backbone of our security but the point of the

spear for a Britain returning to its traditions as a global trading nation, sought after for its innovation, respected for its willingness to defend global prosperity, and feared by its adversaries – a global Britain that is in Palmerston's famous words "a great and energetic nation".