

Defence Secretary's speech at NATO Engages

It's great to see such a diverse audience in the room. We don't just have senior NATO officials and think-tanks here but students from across our Alliance – I understand from 70 countries, 70 countries for 70 years. Today's leaders you are going to hear from and perhaps tomorrow's leaders are here in the room. It is fitting that this conference isn't simply about reflecting on NATO's first 70 years.

It is also about how NATO can continue to make the world safe for another seven decades. And how we can adapt to the new challenges facing us, from cyber threats to climate security.

Historians of NATO know that our Alliance has always risen to whatever challenges have been thrown at it. After the carnage and slaughter of the Second World War, 12 nations came together to guarantee one another's security, protect our freedoms and keep the peace in Europe. We came together to defend our common values and that most noblest of cause – to defend those that cannot defend themselves. That purpose is as true today as it was then. Our Alliance held true to that mission through the long winter of the Cold War. Then, when the Berlin Wall fell some 30 years ago, NATO was instrumental in safeguarding the peace and stability of a continent in flux, turning former adversaries into Allies by holding out the hands of friendship and freedom across the continent of Europe.

And when the world changed again on September 11th 2001, NATO stepped up once more, invoking Article 5 for the first time as we all stood together in support of our US Allies and in solidarity against the scourge of terrorism. Since the events of 2014 and Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, we have adapted again to reinvigorate our deterrence and our defence, with enhanced forward presence, rapid reaction, and higher readiness.

Today our Alliance is not just standing sentinel on the borders of Eastern Europe. It is reaching across continents. And we have more than doubled in size to some 29 countries, soon to be 30, and each of us remains bound by the common values of that founding Treaty – freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. To those that doubt the potency of NATO you should ask yourself why if an organisation is without purpose do our adversaries put so much effort into destabilising our Alliance?

But today we face new challenges, and in keeping with our best traditions we must continue to adapt. Traditional warfare has changed. The threats are no longer only conventional. No longer only overt. Our adversaries are striking from the shadows. They are pursuing new tactics to divide and destabilise. Exploiting new technologies to exacerbate the uncertainties of an uncertain world, and undermine our way of life.

Six years ago the Russian Chief of the General Staff, Valery Gerasimov wrote

that the “rules of war” has changed, as the role of non-military means in achieving political and strategic goals have grown. He said that “long-distance, contactless actions against the enemy [were] becoming the main means of achieving combat and operational goals”. With social media, cyber and more open societies giving our competitors unparalleled opportunities to achieve their aims, the Gerasimov doctrine is here to stay. And hybrid warfare is our new reality. It is constant, and challenging to all our aims.

Our Allies in the Baltic and our partners in Ukraine and Georgia are only too familiar with such tactics. But this is happening right across our Alliance. It is happening here in Britain. Before taking up this post I was the UK’s Security Minister for over three years. I got to see into the shadows and see the daily attacks on our societies that many do not. Cyber attacks, disinformation, assassination, corruption. All prosecuted on our open and liberal societies.

The urgent question is, therefore, how can we individually and, as importantly, collectively respond?

I believe that the answer is three-fold:

It starts with investment. Investment in both our conventional forces, which are so important to effective deterrence, and in those new capabilities needed to address the challenges that lie ahead. In this context, I welcome the news that Canadian and European Allies will be increasing their defence investment by \$400bn by 2024, which represents significant progress towards our shared pledge to spend 2% of GDP on defence, though there is of course still more to do.

And I’m proud that the UK has been taking a lead in NATO. Not only have we consistently spent 2% of our GDP on defence, but we were the first Ally to offer our offensive cyber capabilities to the Alliance.

Today British servicemen and women are standing shoulder-to-shoulder with NATO Allies, including 1,000 British troops leading enhanced forward presence in Estonia and supporting it in Poland, as well as a similar number in Afghanistan, developing Afghan leadership and counter-terrorism capabilities as part of NATO’s Resolute Support Mission.

Next, as the title of this conference reminds us, it’s about innovation.

NATO is now looking at the ways in which new and emerging technologies will continue to change the threat landscape, from hypersonic missiles, reducing our decision-making time in the face of an attack, to quantum computing, potentially rendering current encryption obsolete. We must understand these challenges are what we face today and we must adapt accordingly. And we must constantly be on the hunt for the next great geopolitical disruptors, such as demographic shifts or climate change, or the next technological advancement that changes the game completely.

Maintaining our technological edge is the only way we can avoid obsolescence and deliver on our most important pledge – keeping our people safe.

I am pleased to say that when our leaders meet tomorrow, they will recognise the progress that NATO has made in adapting to these new challenges – agreeing a plan for NATO’s response to emerging and disruptive technologies; recognising two new operational domains in space and cyber space; and developing plans to confront and deter hybrid tactics of the kind I have been speaking about.

But strong though these achievements are, there is always more to do. While the Alliance is faster, fitter and fairer than it has ever been, we will have to keep changing; keep adapting to tomorrow’s challenges.

And finally, it comes down to solidarity.

Our comparative advantage over our competitors has always hinged on our togetherness, our unity. We are a civilian-led Alliance of democratic states. That is not a weakness. That is our greatest strength. And while differences of opinion are normal in any democratic organisation like ours, we ultimately succeed because each of us trusts that the other will have their back. Our joint commitment to Article 5 is the cornerstone of our solidarity. It is the cheapest form of defence, but you can’t have that solidarity without engagement. And that is why we are all here today. NATO needs your insight, your challenge, your new leadership to provide the same level of protection and security to future generations as it did to our forebears.

As Security Minister I used to say that security is not a competition, it is a partnership. That incredible partnership has protected our nations for 70 years. And as long as we keep our solidarity, staying true to our values, our guiding light, then NATO will remain the greatest defensive Alliance the world has ever seen and continue keeping our people safe for many more years to come.

Seventy years ago, at the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington, the US President, Harry S Truman, said: “Men with courage and vision can still determine their own destiny. They can choose slavery or freedom – war or peace.” His words on that day are as true now as they ever were. We must stand together, no side deals, no separate voices. Our adversaries strive for that division, they fund that division, and target that division. We will not let them succeed.