

Defence Secretary's speech at the American Enterprise Institute

Good afternoon. It's great to be back in the United States, after almost 18 months.

Great to see things coming back to life in Washington and see the new administration and there are new threats to tackle.

The intervening period has taught all of us new meanings of 'national security' and the importance of national resilience.

And it's a huge pleasure to speak here at the Enterprise Institute. A place which has, for nine decades, been consistently and persuasively making the case for expanding freedom, opportunity and enterprise.

Last time I was in DC I spoke publicly about the importance of such values in continuing to motivate and mobilise our shared efforts in an increasingly anxious world.

And I explained how the UK was undergoing an 'Integrated Review' of its foreign, security, defence and development policy in order to do just that.

I am not going to rehearse that diagnosis of evolving security threats and the current strategic context. Instead I'll limit my remarks to what are – following the Integrated Review's publication – my strategic priorities for improving our response to those threats and what more is needed if we are to reverse what I believe continues to be a deteriorating environment for our shared interests and our shared values.

Then I hope we can open-up to a discussion and get into some more detail on whatever issues are of most interest to you.

Evolving threats

Since the establishment of this institution the world has experienced much turbulence.

It is eighty years since the strategic shock of an attack on Pearl Harbour precipitated the US's decisive entry into the Second World War.

It is just over seventy years since US and British forces joined our allies on the Korean peninsula to repel Communist and the earliest proxy skirmishes of the Cold War.

It is now three decades since our Tomahawks and tanks sped across the desert to free Kuwait from Saddam's tyranny.

And it is almost twenty years since 9/11, when global terrorism on an epic scale came to this continent – to this part of the world – and the world was

once again thrown into turmoil.

We commemorate the service and sacrifice on each of those anniversaries and I was humbled to visit the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington Cemetery yesterday, but there is also much that we – those charged with defending our nations – must learn from those anniversaries.

There is certainly a lesson on the impacts of technological development and proliferation.

Exploiting new technologies, especially in combination with wider innovation and strategic surprise, can provide significant advantage... but it is often fleeting and rarely decisive.

That is because of an associated lesson, that it is actors' underlying intent, creativity, and sheer willpower that ultimately determines the arc of history, not just technological superiority or capability advantages.

But, perhaps the most salient lesson of all those anniversaries is that the threat against which we defend – that combination of intent and capability – is constantly evolving and if we are to do our job, so must we.

Today, we have entered a new 'competitive age', as it is referred to in our Integrated Review. An era of resurgent authoritarian states, with an ever more aggressive (and regressive) Russia, and an economically and militarily expansionist China.

But it is also an era of diversifying threats, with:

- nations like North Korea and Iran destabilising their regional security;
- violent extremism and terrorism not just enduring but evolving and increasing in lethality;
- both state and non-state actors exploiting digital technologies to undermine rule of law and societal cohesion;
- as well as all the wider pressures on governments, like climate change, global health, population growth, urbanisation and migration – all with their associated human security implications, the threats pile up.

Put more succinctly, it's an era of both the 'dragons' and the 'snakes' that James Woolsey described all those years ago and David Kilcullen has most recently expanded.

And the methods these actors are employing bypass our strengths and exploit our weaknesses. Enabling them to target everything from our satellites, computer networks and critical national infrastructure, to our legal frameworks, political processes and societal cohesion.

They constantly test our thresholds for armed response, avoiding open conflict and in doing so blurring our self-imposed lines between home and abroad, friend and foe, peace and war.

So how should we respond?

Peace through strength

Perhaps by listening to the wisdom of those who have wrestled with such challenges before. Among them the former AEI scholar, US Navy veteran of World War II, and your 38th President, Gerald Ford.

President Ford saw his fair share of turbulence too and his approach was to always return to first principles of shared values. Setting out his National Security policy forty-five years ago, he summed it up in three words: “peace through strength”.

I would argue that, today, that means not just hard military strength, but the strength of our values and the conviction to proactively promote them, and the strength of our partnerships, whether across government and society, or between our international allies and partners.

It is the strength of these relationships – the human sinews between our traditionally standalone institutions – that will ensure peace and prosperity for the future.

Strength of our values

It begins with the strength of conviction in the values we share. For the UK and the US alike, these values – democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and our belief in the power of free and open societies – is what sets us apart from our adversaries and binds us to our friends.

But the international system we built together out of the ashes of World War II is under unprecedented pressure. President Biden is right to say the central challenge of our age is ensuring that democracy remains durable and strong – “the autocrats will not win the future”.

That is why at the recent G7 he and Prime Minister Johnson signed a new Atlantic Charter to deepen our bilateral cooperation to shape and secure the international order of the future, to tackle these evolving threats and to build back better for the 21st Century.

Our Armed Forces absolutely have a role to play in that – hard power underpins soft power – defending those values wherever they are challenged, whether on the global sea as we saw in the Black Sea last month, or helping guard our societies from subversion in cyberspace, as we did during the Covid pandemic.

Military strength

We are giving our forces the military strength they need to deter adversaries

in this new competitive age, pushing back to compete in the 'sub-threshold'. Crucially that is not by sacrificing our values or the rule of law by mimicking their subversive actions, but by maximising our advantages, building-up partnerships, ensuring our presence and persistence to build resilience and relationships where nations are coming under pressure from those who seek only to buy or bully their way to dominance.

Of course deterrence also requires the ability to fight and win, so we are investing heavily in modernising our warfighting capabilities.

We have increased our defence budget by 14% over the next four years, including almost \$120 billion on new equipment and support.

In the skies, there will be brand new F35 Lightning stealth fighters, upgraded Typhoons combat aircraft, new unmanned Protector systems capable of striking remotely, next generation fighter jets and swarming drones.

On land the Army will be more mobile, protected and lethal, with a new Ranger Regiment, able to train, advise and – when needed – to operate alongside our partners in complex, high-threat environments. Their formation was influenced, in part, by your famous Green Berets and I'll be visiting them in Fort Bragg tomorrow to see what more we can learn.

At sea, the Royal Navy will benefit from the first increase in the size of the fleet since the Cold War, with new frigates and submarines joining our mighty HMS Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers, more active and more globally deployed.

Our wargaming, like yours, consistently shows us that speed is the decisive factor in future conflict. Speed of information. Speed of decision-making. Speed of response.

To reduce the time 'from sensor to shooter' and ensure decision-making at the speed of relevance, we are building a secure network, or 'digital backbone', to share and exploit vast amounts of data seamlessly across those domains.

Of course, cyber space is also now a highly contested domain and we have built on our world class defensive cyber capabilities to establish the new, permanent National Cyber Force that brings together the best operators from Defence and the intelligence services to provide a fully transformative offensive cyber capability.

In space we have more to do but we are strengthening our secure satellite network and growing our space domain awareness – something else that I'm looking to learn about when I head to the West Coast later this week.

Underpinning all that progress in cyberspace and space, and throughout our increasingly 'information age' force, is a significant uplift in our spending on R&D (around \$9 billion), so we can exploit innovations not just in current areas like artificial intelligence, hypersonics, and directed energy weapons, but start identifying where we might gain advantages from generation-after-next technologies.

Crucially, we are seeking to do this all in a single, more coherent process. Starting with our recent Science and Technology Strategy to identify 'game changers' and then combining with the new Defence and Security Industrial Strategy to ensure we achieve the pull-through of such developments.

We are seeking to join-up innovative companies large and small to sharpen our cutting edge and ensure that everyone can benefit from the prosperity dividend.

Strength of action

But as those anniversaries of former conflicts teach us, technological advantage only gets you so far and you must still combine them with a strategy to address the threats before you.

I believe that modernising defence must start with ensuring we are a credible and truly threat-oriented organisation, learning from both contemporary and future conflict, and always challenging ourselves to meet those threats and then overmatch them.

So the first step that I took in UK defence reform was establishing a net assessment and challenge function in the Ministry of Defence. And very much like your own versions it is now providing rigour and challenge, encompassing war gaming, doctrine, red teaming and external academic analysis.

This laser-like focusing on threats – rather than prioritising legacy force structures and equipment plans – is urgently needed as this more competitive age rapidly unfolds.

It is already showing us that we can no longer remain a contingent force focused solely on preparation for the 'big war' which, being frank, can become our Armed Forces' 'comfort blank' and is precisely the conflict our adversaries seek to avoid.

So instead of waiting for threats to become acute – like the slowly boiling frog – we must deter and address them at source, becoming more forward, present and persistently engaged, constantly campaigning, ceaselessly pushing back against our adversaries while building the capacity of allies.

'Modern deterrence' has to get smarter and become as much about competing below the threshold of open conflict as above it. I am pleased to say that this is precisely the direction of our doctrinal development.

Last year General Sir Nick Carter, our Chief of the Defence Staff, published the Integrated Operating Concept. It recognises that changes in the information and political environments now impact not just the context but the conduct of military operations and that the notion of war and peace as binary states has given way to a continuum of conflict.

That requires us to prepare our forces for more persistent global engagement and constant campaigning – moving seamlessly from operating to war fighting.

The Armed Forces – working with the rest of government – must think and act

differently. They will no longer be held as a 'force of last resort' but become more present and more active around the world.

Our forces will still be able to warfight as their primary function, but they will also increasingly have a role to play outside what we traditionally consider 'war'; whether that is supporting humanitarian projects, disaster relief, or conflict prevention and stabilisation. Because helping partners help themselves reinforces their resilience.

And because yes, we must always be 'ready to fight and win', but as we all know, better to win without fighting.

All the instruments of state power must be employed in balance, otherwise our policy options risk becoming war or nothing and that is not how we can ever win a strategic competition.

As I've already been suggesting, winning that competition – I believe – will require the strength of our values, the strength of our military (crucially both above and below the threshold), and finally the strength of our partnerships, across government and around the world.

Strength of partnerships

So President Biden was right to say in the Interim Strategic Guidance that "our strength is multiplied when we combine efforts to address common challenges, share costs, and widen the circle of cooperation".

That's why the UK is not merely reinforcing our place as the leading European NATO ally, in spending and capabilities but also the conceptual development of 'NATO 2030'.

We are also now looking to other regions where this strategic competition is presenting itself – the High North, across Africa, in Central and South America, and not least the Indo-Pacific.

And it is the Indo-Pacific where both the great challenges are but also the great opportunities lie, if we get it right. It is where the UK, as a global trading nation, seeks to be the European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence – there for the long term, with closer and deeper partnerships, defending freedom of navigation, political and legal freedoms, and free and fair trade.

That does not mean an exclusively military reposturing but a more strategic whole-of-government campaign, including economic, cultural and diplomatic tools to name but a few.

For years people have been talking about joint working but the track record shows we haven't really meant it. If we are going to compete constantly we are going to have to orientate ourselves to constantly campaign.

To bring to bear on our competitors the broadest range of tools of national power for potentially generations to come.

As a politician, I understand the meaning of campaigning in the world we face. When I am not in power I am campaigning to win.

When I am in power I am campaigning to govern. And when I'm out, I am campaigning to win again.

It is a never-ending cycle because it is the values that we campaign for that endure and not the individual.

So if we really do mean it how far are we prepared to go? Will we change our laws and reform our structures? Will we expand who we share our precious intelligence with?

Will we empower those charged with leading those campaigns the authority to execute them with the same determination as our traditional operations?

And as part of that we must be ready to stand firm with our allies – chief amongst them the United States. As Prime Minister Johnson has said 'America is back and that's a good thing'

Our defence co-operation is the broadest, deepest and most advanced of any two countries in the world. We are ready and able to share your burden of global leadership, wherever and whenever it is required, but let's not leave it until a major conflict breaks out.

The status quo is not self-perpetuating and our forces must adopt a campaigning approach now.

They are already deliberately designed to fight seamlessly alongside the US – we train and exercise together, and now we are just starting to 'operate' together in that same region.

Our Carrier Strike Group, now entering the Indo-Pacific, proves the strength of such partnerships in action.

Your Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS The Sullivans is providing our strike group with air defence and anti-submarine capabilities.

While a squadron of 10 US Marine Corps F-35B Lightnings – the Wake Island Avengers – are proudly flying side-by-side with their UK counterparts.

The deployment has not only contributed NATO's first fifth-generation carrier to Alliance operations and visibly defended the Rules Based International Order.

But its convening power is strengthening alliances further afield and developing new partnerships in strategically vital corners of the globe.

So the Carrier Strike Group really is the embodiment of everything UK Defence is seeking to achieve through our Integrated Review – a major multilateral deployment of cutting-edge military capabilities and partnering with our closest of allies, not to confront an adversary in a crisis but confidently project our shared values.

Right at the heart of that Carrier Group are British and American sailors, marines, airmen and air women, working side-by-side every single day as one team. That is the strength of shared values and deep partnering and I pay tribute to them for all they are doing for our two nations and the region.

My colleague and friend Secretary Austin told me yesterday the motto of the USS The Sullivans, the ship named after five brothers who died in the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal.

'We stick together' and that for me pretty much sums it all up.

I look forward to your questions.