

AFGHANISTAN: SHOULDER TO SHOULDER

Speech by Dr. Liam Fox, Secretary of State for Defence

30 June 2010

It is a great pleasure to be back here at the Heritage Foundation.

The Foundation was kind enough to provide a platform in the United States to me and the British Conservative Party during our years in opposition.

I said then I would return to speak to you as the UK Defence Secretary.

I am pleased to be able to fulfil that promise today.

Together, the United Kingdom, the United States and our allies around the world, face a difficult security environment, where the outlook is sobering and the threats diverse, growing and unpredictable.

We live in a period in which our countries face few direct military threats.

But in this globalised world, the scourge of terrorism, the danger of nuclear proliferation, the ungoverned space that characterise fragile or failed states, and competition for energy and resources, will test our ability to deter, contain and deal with risks to national security.

I want to concentrate most of my remarks today on operations in Afghanistan, because success in Afghanistan is vital to the national security of the UK, the US, our allies and to international security more widely.

And because this is a testing time in Afghanistan.

The price being paid is high, the mission complex, and progress not always obvious to the eye.

So it is understandable that our democratic societies question whether the sacrifice is worth it.

They want to know why we are there, why we cannot bring our troops home immediately, what we are achieving and what success will look like.

I want to take those questions head on today.

In a democracy, our military resilience is in part, dependent on the support of our people.

And to maintain the support of our people, we need to be clear about our objectives, and clear about how we will achieve them.

If we want our people –civilian and military—to be willing to pay the price of success, they need to understand the cost of failure.

ENDURING CAMPAIGN

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First, let's remember why we went to Afghanistan.

In each generation, there are moments of history that people remember vividly – where they were, what they were doing and how they felt.

9/11 was one of those moments.

I was in the House of Commons in London.

On hearing about the first crash, I switched on my television as the second plane smashed into the South Tower. That was the moment my disbelief turned to horror.

It was soon clear that was not an isolated act by a small group of individuals, but a well planned and well executed attack by a well financed and organised group of fanatics against a highly symbolic target.

It was designed both to create maximum loss of life and to diminish the American people's faith in their own Government.

It was an attack not just against people or property, but against a whole way of life - not against the United States alone, but against all free peoples.

A few days later I saw Ground Zero for myself - the ruins of the World Trade Centre still smouldering, marking the graves of over 2,500 innocent people.

The carnage did not discriminate between nationality, colour or creed.

It changed the lives of thousands of families and it changed the way political leaders saw the world.

On 9/11 the world not only watched – but the world then acted.

For the first and only time in its 60 year history, NATO invoked Article V of the Washington Treaty – an attack against one being an attack against all.

So in Afghanistan today, the operations of NATO and other Coalition allies are a direct consequence of 9/11.

It was there that the Taliban rulers gave Al-Qaeda sanctuary, allowed it to run terrorist training camps, and made it a base for terrorist attacks across the world.

The Taliban were driven out of power by Afghan and international forces.

Al-Qaeda fled to the border areas of Pakistan.

Although reduced and under considerable pressure, they are still there and continue to pose a real and significant threat to us.

So the first reason we cannot bring our troops home immediately is that their mission is not yet completed.

Were we to leave prematurely, without degrading the insurgency and increasing the capability of the Afghan National Security Forces we

would probably see the return of the destructive forces of trans-national terror.

Not only would we risk the return of civil war in Afghanistan creating a security vacuum but we would also risk the destabilisation of Pakistan with potentially unthinkable regional, and possibly nuclear, consequences.

The second reason is that it would be a shot in the arm to jihadists everywhere, re-energising violent radical and extreme Islamism. It would send the signal that we did not have the morale resolve and political fortitude to see through what we ourselves have described as a national security imperative.

Premature withdrawal would also damage the credibility of NATO which has been the cornerstone of the defence of the West for more than half a century.

To leave before the job is finished would leave us less safe and less secure. Our resolve would be called into question, our cohesion weakened, and the Alliance undermined.

It would be a betrayal of all the sacrifices made by our Armed Forces in life and limb.

SHOULDER TO SHOULDER

On 9/11, Britain stood shoulder to shoulder with America.

In Afghanistan today, Britain stands shoulder to shoulder with America.

Shoulder to shoulder too with more than 40 other nations who have troops on the ground there.

We stand alongside the Afghan Government, with the Afghan National Security Forces who are growing in size, capability and experience every day.

And we stand with ordinary Afghans, tired of decades of war, tired of the violent fanatics in their midst, and who crave the security to be able to get on with their lives in peace. But freedom and security come at a price.

In Britain we remain eternally grateful for the sacrifice made in the last century by the millions of people from the US, from across Europe, and from the Commonwealth, near and far, who stood resolutely with us in two world wars - in defiance of tyranny, in defence of freedom.

Over the last decade, with our countries engaged in war in Iraq and Afghanistan, remembrance has taken on a new poignancy.

This year alone in Afghanistan, 264 US and UK troops have been killed - the Coalition as a whole has lost 321.

But the Afghans themselves are also paying an even higher price – a recent Congressional research report estimates that the Afghan National Security Forces have suffered over 3,000 casualties since 2007. They, and countless, thousands of civilians have been victims of the Taliban.

But violent extremism and terrorism are not just problems with Afghanistan.

On the other side of the border the Pakistani security forces, too are making significant sacrifices too as they hunt down al-Qaeda and violent extremists in their own country.

We cannot take the risk of a destabilised Pakistan. We must support the Government in defending the security of its population.

Make no mistake, al-Qaeda and their Taliban supporters are taking considerable hits—their global core has been severely degraded.

In Afghanistan, the counterinsurgency strategy is increasingly being put in place. Measuring its success not in the number of dead terrorists or insurgents but in the number of the local population protected and in the number of Afghans who believe we and they are gaining the upper hand and have the will to see the campaign through.

A safer, more secure population means better intelligence—intelligence on where IEDs are planted and by whom, where arms are stored and who the local insurgents are.

As we challenge the insurgents on their vital ground we are bound to meet resistance and increased violence.

That is why we are likely to see an increased number of ISAF casualties over this summer.

The political and military leaders across the ISAF nations need to prepare the public.

We must hold our nerve, maintain our resolve, and have the resilience to see the job through.

STRATEGY TO SUCCEED

So what will success look like? Let us remember that our mission in Afghanistan is first, foremost and in its finality a mission of national security.

Our purpose is to degrade and manage the terrorist threat emanating from the region to ensure al-Qaeda cannot once again have sanctuary in Afghanistan.

So in Afghanistan success means first continuing to reverse the momentum of the Taliban-led insurgency.

Second, to contain and reduce the threat from the insurgency to a level that allows the Afghan Government to manage it themselves.

And third creating a stable and capable enough system of national security and governance so the Afghan Government can provide internal security on an enduring basis.

This is necessarily a comprehensive effort.

So we must remember this is not a classic war of attrition.

Our aims will not, and cannot, be achieved by military means alone.

There is no cliff edge towards which the Taliban are being herded.

There will be no decisive Napoleonic battle.

There is no group of commanders sitting patiently in a tent awaiting a delegation under a white flag offering a formal surrender.

Insurgencies usually end with political settlements.

So bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan will be a process and not an event.

An effective Government—on both the local and national level, and an inclusive political settlement will be vital to lasting peace.

Supporting and facilitating the Afghan Government's political reconciliation and reintegration initiatives such as the recent Peace Jirga must be an imperative.

But we must also keep up the political pressure on the Afghan Government to make progress on the pledges made at the London Conference – to tackle corruption and improve its efficiency.

The aim of these initiatives is to provide confidence in the Afghan people for a better future.

By showing the Afghan people that their path leads away from the Taliban.

By supporting brave individuals and villages who stand up to intimidation.

By encouraging local shuras to seek and support the stability and security that ISAF, the ANSF and the Afghan Government can bring.

That is why the work of the Provincial Reconstructions Teams is so important, with civilian experts from a wide range of Government Departments operating alongside the military to help local Afghans bring improved governance, services and development.

Improvements which reduce the need for ordinary Afghans to turn to the Taliban for work, money or justice, make security and lasting stability more likely.

Can it be achieved?

I believe it can.

We are making real progress.

The British effort has been focussed in Helmand since 2006, alongside troops from Denmark, Estonia and most recently Georgia and now with where the significant resources of the US Marine Corps. Afghan Government authority now extends to over three quarters of Helmand districts compared to less than half only two years ago.

Areas that were once overrun by insurgents, such as Nad-e-Ali, are now slowly returning to a semblance of normal life. I walked round the market there myself less than a month ago.

In Marjah the situation is more difficult and complex, with the Taliban still attempting to exert influence through intimidation and brutality.

This was always going to be the most difficult challenge.

In a campaign which has the allegiance of the population at its heart, it is going to take time to build confidence, for Afghan government institutions to develop and see the improvements that have been made elsewhere.

Across Afghanistan stabilisation advisers, political officers and governance experts are on the ground alongside the military and the UN: establishing community councils; dealing with security, justice and economic development; helping build hospitals, clinics and schools; improving irrigation systems for farmers and enabling major projects to build up infra-structure and commerce.

But of course, without the security that ISAF seeks to bring alongside the Afghan National Security Forces, this effect will not last.

The Afghan Army has been growing steadily over the years - and by 20% in recent months, to around 125,000.

The ANSF already has leads responsibility for security in and around Kabul.

But we need to strengthen the training mission even further. Some countries may have political or constitutional problems sending combat troops but there is no reason why any NATO country cannot do more to help train the ANSF – it is a measure of our commitment and resolve as an Alliance.

In military terms, building the size and strength of the Afghan National Security Forces is the route to bringing our troops home without leaving a security vacuum behind.

I am heartened by the progress that has been made, but I recognise that the tough times are by no means over.

It was a true sign of statesmanship from President Obama last year, that he was able to keep his focus on the interests of national and international security, and resist those, some from within his own party, who sought a premature exit.

In the capitals of the ISAF nations, we must all recognise that tactical set-backs are not strategic defeats.

Progress will be incremental.

Our natural impatience to see our troops come home, should be seen in the context of the needs of national security.

But we should not take for granted that the images of 9/11 still resonate with the public in the same way they did six, seven or eight years ago.

An 18 year old American Marine in Helmand was only nine years old at the time of the attacks on September 11th.

A 22 year old British Lieutenant was only 13.

Across the alliance we need to do better at reminding our publics why we are fighting in Afghanistan and why the cost of failure is a price we cannot afford to pay.

And we need to have clear messages for the Afghan people, and those messages need to be communicated by our deeds as well as words.

We are neither colonisers nor occupiers. We are there under a UN mandate.

We are not in Afghanistan to create a carbon copy of a western democracy, and we are not there to convert the people to western ways.

We seek the government of Afghanistan by the Afghans themselves.

We insist only that it does not pose a security threat to our interests or allies.

CONCLUSION

Our two countries are working hand in glove in Afghanistan. And I am clear that Britain's relationship with the US will remain central to and critical for our national security.

The United States will remain the United Kingdom's most important and prized strategic relationship.

And NATO will remain our first instrument of choice for responding to the collective security challenges we face.

It is for that reason that interoperability with partners will be a core part of what we will be seeking to achieve in the Strategic Defence and Security Review we are now undertaking.

Clearly we need to consult with our allies in this work.

And I have taken forward these discussions on my visit here with Secretary Gates and others.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The relationship between our two nations is based on shared history, shared values and shared interests.

We have stood shoulder to shoulder at many times in the past, in the face of tyranny and adversity – in defence of freedom.

And today in Afghanistan we stand shoulder to shoulder again, alongside our many partners and alongside the Afghans themselves.

In his famous speech at Fulton, Missouri in 1946, Winston Churchill warned that fraternal association would not be enough to overcome the Iron Curtain that he described dividing the free world from the subjugated.

Churchill said this needed:

“The continuance of the intimate relations between our military advisers, leading to common study of potential dangers, the similarity of weapons and manuals of instructions....”

I too believe that now, in our age, in the shadow of 9/11, fraternal association is not enough.

We must continue to strengthen our military relationship and remodel our Armed Forces to face new threats in this new era.

For when the Stars and Stripes and the Union Jack fly side by side, we are greater than the sum of our parts.

And together, we can forge a better, safer future.

ENDS