

SPEECH BY THE RT HON JOHN HUTTON, SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE
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Two hours ago I stood along with millions of people across the country to commemorate those who made the ultimate sacrifice in conflicts from 1914 to the present day.

In 1918 the relief of Armistice Day must have been overwhelming to every man, woman and child who had lived through the horror of the First World War. The same, I know, was true in 1945. These two wars were the defining conflicts of the 20th century. Experienced by everyone then and remembered now by all of us who enjoy the liberty and freedom our predecessors fought and sometimes died to defend.

Today, the nature of modern conflict means that few of us share the experience of the brave men and women, and that of their families, who serve in the Royal Navy and Royal Marines, Army, and Royal Air Force. Though we see them on television, read first hand accounts in the papers and internet, we can have no conception of what it is like to patrol the streets of Basra. Or fly a helicopter into a forward operating base in Helmand. Or suffer the anguish of families who wait for their loved ones to come home safe and sound. And in this week of Remembrance, my thoughts and prayers are with all of those families.

It is just over a month since I was appointed to this post. I have visited Iraq and Afghanistan once, each for a couple of days. So, I will not stand here this afternoon and pretend that my understanding of life on the ground is any greater than the rest of us.

As Defence Secretary, however, I feel a unique responsibility for the extraordinary young men and women of our Armed Forces, particularly when so much is expected of them.

So my most important responsibility is to ensure that when I ask them to serve, they know that their mission is clear. Unambiguous. Understood and supported by British people.

So during this week of Remembrance and the visit to London of President Karzai, I thought it was right today to restate the case for why we have 8000 troops in Afghanistan. And why they should stay until their job is complete.

I want to address today directly those critics who claim our presence in Afghanistan is in neither our national interest nor those of the Afghans. The critics who doubt we can achieve our objectives. Who say the best thing we can do is to get out.

Now, in both 20th Century World Wars, Britain fought because we needed to defend our vital national interest.

The same applies today.

No politician, whether in government or Parliament, can ever take lightly the decision to commit British forces to military action. In Afghanistan, the deployment of our Armed Forces was in response to an attack on our national interests every bit as unambiguous as the threat presented by the invasion of Belgium in 1914 and the invasion of Poland in 1939.

9/11, lest we ever forget, was a crime by Al Qaida against the entire civilised world. It was the largest and most spectacular in a series of attacks from embassies to night clubs, from Kenya to Bali and a worldwide campaign of terror. And they possessed a common thread. Indiscriminate violence. A total disregard for the innocent. For race, nationality, and even religion. It was a strategy designed to provoke disproportionate retaliation. To polarise countries, peoples and religions.

But far from creating division, 9/11 brought the world together, led by the United Nations, to tackle terrorism at its complex and interconnected sources. And as we deal with the cause of those events, we must stay united in purpose against that common threat.

In 2001, the most important source of the direct threat to the UK and the civilised world was Afghanistan. It was there that 9/11 was planned and facilitated. It was there that Al Qaida had a secure refuge for its franchise of indiscriminate violence.

Afghanistan was Al Qaida's headquarters. From 1996 the Taliban regime gave it sanctuary and assistance, and made 9/11 possible.

Let just me remind you what Afghanistan was like then.

The Taleban created a society that was autocratic and despotic. They imposed a religious and social straightjacket on the people. They repressed and killed, with the utmost brutality, to ensure uniformity. They despised knowledge and subjugated women to a brutal and violent existence.

Now these violations of basic human rights might alone be enough to justify action by the international community.

But in and of itself, they do not present a national security argument for the deployment of UK forces. This in my mind is a critical distinction. It goes to the heart of the reason why we have 8000 troops in Afghanistan.

We undertook military action in Afghanistan because this was the base from which Al Qaida leaders, through the sanctuary offered by the Taleban, were planning and directing major terrorist operations throughout the world - operations that would, without any doubt at all in my mind, have been aimed at the UK. They were recruiting, indoctrinating and training terrorists. Acting as a communications hub. Generating funding from drugs and other illegal activities.

9/11 didn't then and doesn't now remain the limit of Al Qaida's ambitions. Whilst using Afghanistan as a haven, Al Qaida ran training courses on how to make and use poisons. After 9/11, we found, in Kandahar, a laboratory for developing biological agents, along with evidence that scientists had been recruited to assist in their production. Today, coalition forces are confronted by insurgents whose morality is so depraved that they would use children as human shields and suicide bombers.

Utterly repugnant. But that is what we are up against.

And it is that lethal combination of extremism and willpower that has to be confronted and dealt with.

So, let us be clear: if they had the means no moral compunction would restrain the unleashing of those kinds of destructive forces on the streets of Britain.

Al Qaida and the Taleban had a close and mutually dependent alliance. National security is the primary responsibility of any government. It was and remains in our national security interest to prevent Afghanistan from providing a safe haven for this ruthless terrorist threat.

Now, of course some have argued that once the Taleban regime had been toppled and Al Qaida's terrorist infrastructure dismantled, our job and the job of our international friends and allies work was complete.

Again, the decision to stay was based on a hard-headed assessment of our clear national security interest in preventing the re-emergence of Taleban rule or Afghanistan's decline into a failing state again. Either of those outcomes would have allowed Al Qaida to return and recreate their terrorist infrastructure.

The same calculations informed our later decisions to make a significant military contribution to the International Security and Assistance Force, and then to play a lead role in NATO's operations in the south, especially in Helmand Province.

If we hadn't gone into Southern Afghanistan in 2006 the Taleban would probably now control Southern Helmand and Kandahar. There are many students of history in this room today who would tell us that those who control Kandahar have often controlled Kabul. Which would give free reign to Al Qaida through Afghanistan. Pre 9/11 all over again.

So I am absolutely clear that our commitment to Afghanistan is first and foremost about the UK's national security.

2008 has been a tough year for coalition forces. And, with national elections in 2009, the coming 12 months are likely to be equally as tough. It is going to test the resolve of the international community.

There has been I believe real progress since 2001 but I would be the first to recognise that Afghanistan's system of governance remains fragile; economic growth disappointing; Taleban insurgency in the east and south continues to pose a real challenge; and the dangerous link between terrorism, organised crime and narcotics remains real and obvious.

Now we have set ourselves three strategic objectives. First, that Al Qaida does not return to Afghanistan. Secondly, that Afghanistan remains a legitimate and increasingly effective state, able over time to handle its own security. And thirdly, to prevent the insurgency posing a threat to Afghan peace and prosperity. Achieving these three objectives will define the success of achieving our mission in Afghanistan.

My visit last month helped me to answer in my own mind the question that every Defence secretary must ask about every military commitment: is the mission achievable? Is the sacrifice worth it? Should we stay the course or concede defeat by another name and negotiate deals with the Taleban.

Now for me, the national security arguments that took us to Afghanistan are stronger today than they were in 2001. If walking away then would have damaged those interests, scuttling away now would deal them a profoundly dangerous blow.

In my view our engagement is as much a security priority for the UK today as the world wars or the cold war of the last century. Terrorism poses a direct threat to the security of the British people. So, let us not for one moment think that it does not threaten our way of life, our values of democracy and human rights.

Now we have experienced the tragic consequences of indiscriminate terrorist action here in our capital city. 52 people died and 700 were injured in a cowardly and shocking act of violence on 7th July 2005. Every week our security and police forces across Britain do an incredible job trying to keep us safe.

Terrorism is a constant threat. One that actually cannot be understated. Wished away or appeased.

Now it has to be confronted. Wherever and whenever it threatens our security here at home.

That is why we have 8000 troops in Afghanistan.

And to those who say that we can never succeed, that we should walk away and accept defeat, I say simply this: the victims of that kind of defeatism would be the British people. We would have abandoned our ability to tackle terrorism at source. And we would then have to deal with it here on our own streets.

For that is where Al Qaida would eventually manifest itself, escalating the campaign that predated our engagement in Afghanistan. I do not want to see British youngsters being indoctrinated into extremism at new Al Qaida camps ruled by the Taleban in Afghanistan.

Withdrawal would confirm Al Qaida propaganda that Britain, like the Soviet Union before, bombed and then bolted. We would be portrayed as either wrong, callous or weak. And the lesson our friends, vulnerable states, potential aggressors and terrorists would take is that contrary to our experience in the world wars, the Falklands or Northern Ireland, we would give up and go home. Now I believe, very strongly, we must never send such a message.

When the case for acting to defend our vital national interests is put fairly and squarely to the British people they have always responded. I recognise the responsibility to continue to make the case. It would be a huge mistake for any politician to take consent for the deployment of our Armed Forces for granted. Politicians have to earn and re-earn that consent. The public have the right to question both our strategy as well as our tactics. This is after all, the freedom previous generations have fought and died to maintain. And like these previous conflicts, the military mission in Afghanistan requires patience and persistence. Neither comes easily in the era of 30 second sound bites.

We are engaged in one of the first large scale counter insurgency operations to be conducted in the post-Cold War, post-9/11 world. And of course this is a conflict with no recognisable front line. No neat lines on a map we can all study and can follow at home. No territory to conquer. This is not a dispute between states but within one. Amongst the people. Within the community. With no quick fixes.

Afghanistan, I think, is unique in the demands it places on our Armed Forces and the environment in which they are working. Malaya, Iraq and Oman were different. We need to show the same patience that we have at other times in our history to complete this mission. But large scale counter insurgency isn't dealt with in a week, a month or a year.

In Afghanistan, the first key element of success is the international coalition of which we are part. We operate at the invitation of the Afghan Government, under a UN mandate, restated and strengthened only two months ago, and alongside over 40 other partners in NATO and the EU and beyond. In Helmand alone we work successfully with troops from Denmark, Estonia, US, Australia and Afghanistan.

Multinational operations can frustrate, we all know that, and there are areas in which some of our partners must improve usability and capability. But even the deepest sceptic recognises the benefits that 30,000 European troops bring to that theatre. A number inconceivable even five years ago. And politically NATO's involvement should send a message to Afghans of all persuasions that the international community is there in support of the Afghan authorities for the long haul, as we were in the Cold War, as we were in the Balkans. However long it takes to get the job done.

The second element is an effective counter insurgency strategy which combines both our military and political efforts.

Our military and civil effort is working to dismantle the insurgency. We are pursuing an approach which combines military operations with civilian stabilisation activities. Increasingly this will make the space for longer term development work to help Afghans secure and govern their own communities according to their own priorities. The Taleban know that they cannot defeat us tactically or strategically. All they can offer are more acts of indiscriminate violence in the hope that we lose the will to stay the course. We won't.

Thirdly, and critical to the mission, is 'Afghanisation'. Helping the Afghans take responsibility for their own security. This is the coalition's military mission. And this is what will ultimately define the nature of military success. And here are making significant progress. The Afghan National Army are taking part in the majority now of all military operations. In Helmand, ANA battalions are able to take the lead on operations and have scored a number of very significant successes.

Now, much more needs to be done. Police and judicial reform is less well advanced. We previously underestimated the numbers of Afghan troops required in Afghanistan. So the decision to double the ANA from 65,000 to 134,000 by 2014 reflects that reassessment. A well trained army on that scale will be increasingly able to provide for its own security.

Now, British military experts based in US are working closely with General Petraeus to review the implementation of the whole strategy of the coalition.

We will continue to play our part in building a secure and democratic Afghanistan because our national security depends on it. We are making a significant contribution to the coalition's current military effort. Our forces have been heavily committed for several years in both Afghanistan and Iraq. No one can say that the UK is not pulling our weight in the international coalition and we expect others to do as well.

And the Afghan Government must do its part too, to ensure that the ANA becomes increasingly capable of operating on its own, initially in combat roles and eventually in support roles.

Fourth, we have got to step up efforts with the Afghan Government to break the link between narcotics and the insurgency. The Taleban and the opium poppy are odd and old bedfellows, but the extent to which the drugs trade funds and reinforces the insurgency should be clear to all of us. Though counter narcotics is rightly a police responsibility, today the Afghans do not yet have the capability to discharge that role fully. NATO has therefore authorised ISAF to assist where narcotics targets are linked to the insurgency.

Corruption created by the drugs trade is deeply embedded throughout Afghan society. In Helmand, Governor Mangal is with our help beginning an ambitious counter-narcotics programme which will begin to wean farmers away from the poppy. Fundamental to this is the provision of meaningful alternative livelihoods that ensure peasant farmers are not further disadvantaged. President Karzai's decision to set up an anti-corruption commission has also sent, I believe, an important and vital message.

The fifth element of our strategy is reconciliation. This issue gets misrepresented because it is often tagged on to the end of a sentence by those who say that the military campaign can never be successful.

If there is one important lesson from history that it taught that there can be no long term solution to any conflict without a political settlement. But, and this is critical, history also

teaches us that you must negotiate a political settlement from a position of strength, not weakness.

It is of course right for the Afghan Government to talk to those who aspire to lay down their arms and enter the political process. We all welcome that. The Taleban is not a single united identity. By no means are all those fighting under its banner likely to share the extremist theology of its core leadership or of Al Qaida. We must and we should reach out to those who are willing to turn away from them and renounce violence.

But reconciliation will only happen while the Afghan Government and ISAF are seen to be winning politically and militarily, and prepared for the long haul. It is not only our enemies who must believe that we are prepared to stay the course. Those pragmatic, uncommitted people who form the majority of any community must also be convinced of that as well.

I have consciously left perhaps the greatest element of complexity to the end that is Afghanistan's relationships with neighbouring Pakistan.

The UK's national security interest is not confined to the borders of Afghanistan because this is and remains a regional challenge.

Most people understand that Pakistan matters to us not only for our historic ties and because of the almost one million ethnic Pakistanis now form part of modern Britain.

Pakistan is an important influence regionally and in the Islamic world. A nuclear power. A new democracy and a vital partner in the fight against terrorism and extremism.

Pakistan matters because the 1500 mile border with Afghanistan is porous, particularly in the south. Unless authorities on both sides can work effectively together, neither the insurgency in east and south of Afghanistan nor the instability in Pakistan's border regions can be fully contained.

For our troops in Helmand, Pakistan matters because the Taleban are directed and supplied from across the border. Most critically, however, Pakistan matters to us all because it is there that Al Qaida has retreated and reformed, and from where it casts a reduced but potent shadow across every nation. This has driven US policy on both sides of the border, giving greater prominence in eastern Afghanistan to counter terrorism than perhaps to counter insurgency.

So, cross-border security must be at the core of our approach. And in practical terms, encouraging cross-border security cooperation, building on our traditional good relations with the Pakistan military and supporting, as we should and will, the new civilian government in Islamabad are as important as any element in our Afghan strategy.

After our third summer in Helmand down the south, we are still learning how to operate and realise our objectives. That is the nature of any prolonged and complex campaign. Take Helmand province for example. A tribal melting pot, the largest of which is the Alizai with around 20 subsets. Lay on top of that the influences of kith, kin, and the Pashtun tribal code, tribal and traditional loyalties and you will begin to understand just how a complex an environment it is. Our people are constantly trying to decipher that complexity in order to do their jobs with empathy.

Even after a single visit I am confident that we are putting in place the people and capabilities that can lead to success. Provided we have the strategic patience shown by past generations, I believe we can succeed.

What our 8000 soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen and women are doing in Helmand and across the south is invaluable, both tactically as well as strategically. They know better than anyone that insurgency cannot be contained, diminished and eradicated solely in Helmand, nor by military means alone.

It is a profound mistake to believe that we should switch to an exclusively political focus in Afghanistan. As I have said recently, there is little point in building new schools and new medical clinics only to find a resurgent Taleban bulldozing it a few weeks later. The resolution of every significant conflict in history has contained military, political and economic phases. It is a balance of objectives that inevitably shifts over time. And the military phase in Afghanistan remains as vital as ever.

The First and Second World Wars were the defining conflicts of the last century. It may be that Afghanistan will be the defining conflict of this century. It does strike to the heart of our interests as a nation. And the preservation of the values that all of us today hold most dear.

Timeless values that have been preserved by previous generations. And they continue to define our concepts of right and wrong – good and evil. Democracy. Freedom. Tolerance.

My central argument is that these values are under attack in new ways and by different means today from those which characterised the Two World Wars. But no one should doubt the seriousness of the threat we now face to our freedoms and liberties from those who fight every advance for democracy, every expression of free choice, every manifestation of individual rights.

Now, in taking up this struggle for our own national security, we were right to join the coalition that brought down the Taleban and expelled Al Qaida. We were right to take a lead role in implementing the UN mandate and supporting the democratic Afghan Government. We were right last year to put our weight behind a comprehensive counter insurgency strategy. And we are right now to commit ourselves to seeing that strategy through.

None of these arguments however compelling they are, take away from the extraordinary sacrifice that is being shown by our people in pursuit of these aims.

A very heavy price has already been borne in Afghanistan, where 122 men and women of the British Armed Forces have died in the service of their country, defending these fundamental freedoms.

Their personal bravery and courage, I believe, is in every way equal to the sacrifice of those who came before them. So is the burden carried today by their families. I am acutely aware of that, never more so than during Remembrance Day. Thank you.