

Minister for Armed Forces speech at the London Defence Conference

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The Minister for Armed Forces delivered a closing speech at the London Defence Conference.

First of all, I'd just like to say thank you to the London Defence Conference, but also all of you individually. Saturday afternoon, and you're all here showing an interest in taking part in defence and security, which is a huge, a huge effort, both professionally and personally, above and beyond the call. So thank you very much for being here.

I'm due to give the closing address and interestingly, I've just got back from Cyprus and Ukraine. Now they're two very different places, but both tell you the same thing: the world has changed.

In Ukraine, you see a war evolving in real time. Drones everywhere. The kill chain is now compressed. Front lines that are no longer fixed.

But you also see something else. A country under sustained attack with thousands of drones and missiles hitting cities night after night, energy infrastructure targeted, families living with constant uncertainty.

And Russia is not just fighting a war in Ukraine. It is adapting learning, and it's exporting what it learns. Working with Iran, it's sharing technology, enabling attacks on our allies.

We're seeing that play out in real time, every hour of every day, and we're seeing the oil price spike to Russia's benefit.

So we welcome the ceasefire, and we strongly encourage rapid progress towards a substantive negotiated settlement.

But in the meantime, Russia has continued its step up strikes on Ukraine, relentlessly and indeed at scale, with around 7000 attacks a day on the front line, and 55,000 drone and missile strikes last year alone, trying to break the country's will and cohesion as much as its capability.

And yet, despite all of that, Ukraine still stands. Its economy is under strain. Its infrastructure has been hit repeatedly. Millions have been displaced, and still people go to work, still services operate, still the country fights on. That is resilience.

It's not a concept, but as a lived reality, and it should make us all pause for thought. Because if we think resilience is something we can switch on in a crisis. You, I, we are collectively wrong. It has to be built in advance.

Now I spent 24 years in uniform, and towards end of that time, it was already clear what was going on. You could see warfare changing. You could see the pace of adaptation increasing.

I watched the 2023 counter offensive on the Zaporizhzhia front, which was fought with courage and determination, stall against 90,000 double stacked anti tank mines and 600,000 anti personnel mines.

Watching casualties in their thousands, and I saw a lack of resource drive innovation at a pace that was both unstoppable and extraordinary. The kind of innovation that only happens when a nation is under existential pressure, when survival overtakes everything else and for the industry partners out there, when winning overtakes the requirement to make profit.

And at the same time, you can see we were not moving fast enough. Too often, we were preparing for the last war, not the next one.

And I came to a simple view, if we did not change a pace, we would fall behind, and that is one of the reasons I indeed am stood here today.

Drone and uncrewed systems now dominate the battlefield. It'd be remiss of me at the London Defence Conference not to delve into some detail, especially the audience we have here today.

Now, data, in my mind, is the new gun power, fuelling kill webs and targeting systems across the front line in Ukraine. Now, large conflicts are often measured in statistics, and in some cases, we're falling into the same trap in Ukraine as a whole.

But industry is now producing millions of drones. More than 90% of all casualties are linked to drone warfare. 85% of those systems are made in Ukraine.

Russia is trying to out manufacture Ukraine 7 million drones a year. Just think about the just think about the size and the shape, 7 million drones.

Now, let me put these figures into a little bit of perspective, because I think it's useful. Tactics are one thing, but industry and common economics are another.

On the way back from Ukraine, I was sat in a plane, sort of dabbling with statistics and maths, which is dangerous being an ex Marine, but the rough analysis starts to show the scale of change that we have to go through.

In Ukraine, one drone equates to a lethality of 22 artillery rounds. Lethality in action, 22 artillery rounds. Now, if you scale that logic up and think not only about the kill chain, but the supply chain behind it, the implications are profound, even more significant beyond the front line, perhaps behind it.

At the height of the counter offensive, which I mentioned earlier, in 2023 Ukraine, was far between 16 and 18,000 rounds a day in artillery. That's about 900 tons of metal every day flying through the air.

An overly simplistic calculation suggests you would need around 57 truckloads of your average truck a day just to move the shells for one day.

Now, some people will be sceptical about one drone to 22 artillery round stats, and that's fair enough. Equivalence is never exact, and there are a lot of factors at play, so let me have it. Let's be fair to some of those individuals.

At one to 11, you would need 1637 drones to generate the equivalent battlefield effect. That's two truckloads, not 57. Now for the military people amongst us, think of the logistics behind that. Follow that logic across every part of the battlefield, and you begin to grasp the scale of the challenge that is now required, not tomorrow, but now.

So what? There are still those who say we will fight differently, that Ukraine offers, in some cases,

false lessons, that fifth and sixth generation capability will prevail. In some cases, they're right, but I would argue they're also wrong. We will have no choice but to adapt. But it's not either, either or. It's a blend. It's a high, low mix.

We must continue to learn, but increasingly we must begin to act. My simple vignette and simple maths demonstrate the impact innovation has on logistics.

But what does that mean for every other factor in the battlefield, our industry, our innovation moves, our supply chains, they all need to see the new reality and adapt now.

If Ukraine is the teacher that has taught us economics of modern warfare, Iran is the headmaster that's just hit us with the ruler and told us to listen.

The economics of warfare matter, and we must learn and act now and act together. The consequences of ignoring these lessons will be grievous.

In the future, if Russia looks over a NATO, a JEF or an allied border and sees a force that has not adapted to the lessons of Ukraine, it will not see deterrence.

It will see opportunity. Deterring a country that has taken over a million casualties, more casualties in America took in the entire Second World War, is a challenge, and I'm unsure that we collectively can comprehend what that means.

Part of that is not viewing resilience just about military capability, something Ukraine has learned, but defining how a country understands its strength.

Indeed, resilience is much more multifaceted. And we often talk about defence - bombs, bullets, ships, planes - but the reality is the economy, the NHS and education, we often talk about being separate. Well, they are not.

You can spend billions on defence, but if families are struggling in the economy is under strain, you're kidding yourself about how strong this country really is.

And here I speak as a lad from Aberdeen who joined up pretty much straight out of school with a mum who fought hard to bring me and my brothers and sisters up in some pretty bleak times.

Understanding that is part of what defines me as a politician and my approach to leadership as a Minister in the Ministry of Defense.

Because strength is not just what sits on the front line. It's what sits behind it, and indeed underneath it.

And what this period is exposing us is that parts of that underlying system are more fragile than we've been prepared to admit.

If families are one bill away from trouble, the country is not stable. And in a more volatile energy environment, those pressures can increase quickly.

If the NHS is not working, people cannot work. If families come under pressure, growth slows. If young people do not have real roots into skills at work, we weaken over time.

Ukraine shows us the other side of that equation, a country under immense pressure, where the cost of living has surged, where infrastructure has been damaged, and yet where resilience holds.

We should not assume we would respond in the same way, unless we build that resilience now.

So when we talk about readiness, we need to think more broadly. Yes, it's about capable Armed Forces, and of course, supporting Ukraine with 4.5 billion in military assistance over the last year. On NATO's eastern flank, in the high north and, of course, across the Middle East.

But readiness today and resilience today is about how quickly we can also adapt, how quickly you can learn, and whether you can scale when it matters.

And I keep coming back to Ukraine, because there are so many lessons, drones account for the largest proportion of battlefield effects.

The first time since the First World War, artillery has been overtaken as the major contributor to casualties, where relatively cheap systems can destroy high value exquisite targets, where innovation cycles are measured in weeks, not months, definitely not years.

This is not niche capability. This is the future of warfare. This is why we're investing 4 billion in uncrewed systems, why we're building an integrated targeting network, and why we're working directly with Ukraine.

Because readiness is not just what you buy, it's how fast you learn. The battle space now includes infrastructure, energy networks, data communication, supply chains and the digital layer that sits across it.

And what we're seeing now is that disruption is one part of the system does not stay contained. It moves, it compounds and it takes time to work through.

And in some cases, the second order effects of disruption are more far more consequential than the initial shock. Damage to production, processing and transport infrastructure does not resolve quickly, even when the immediate crisis passes, the effect continues to be felt.

Too often we assume systems will snap back nice and quickly, back to where they were. Well they rarely do, which means resilience is not just about absorbing the first shock, it's about sustaining through what follows next.

That has implications for how we think about energy security, about domestic capability, and about how much risk we're prepared to carry on critical parts of the system.

Industry and capital and the state cannot do this alone. We need private capital at scale to build capability and capacity to drive innovation and to accelerate delivery.

Because in the end, wars are not won on paper. They're won by what you can produce and indeed how quickly you can produce it.

Now there's one thing worse than working with allies, and that's working without them, and our alliances remain decisive.

Russia remains the primary threat to European security, further underlined by the Defence Secretary on Thursday who exposed just their latest hostile naval activity.

And we have to be clear, the war in Ukraine, the tactics used by Iran are separate. They are connected through shared technology, through shared and aligned interests, and through pressure they place on our economics and energy systems.

Our response is clear. It's NATO first, but not NATO only. We lead with allies across Europe, across the JEF and beyond, because readiness is a collective.

And for those of you here from the United States, let me say this, the UK and US relationship is not measured in commentary.

It is measured in what we do and what we have done, in the depth of our integration, in the intelligence and operations we have shared, and indeed in our history, in the capabilities we developed together, and in the access and support we provide from the North Atlantic to the systems that underpin the very foundations of modern warfare.

Friends can disagree. We've been here before: Vietnam, the Falklands. In reality is our cooperation is continuous. It's deeply embedded across our economy, our industry, our culture and our militaries, and it will take more than a year or two to pull that apart. The answer is, united, we are stronger. That's the reality.

And finally, but perhaps the most important point: people.

You can have the best equipment in the world, but if people do not feel valued, you will not get the best out of them. That's why pay matters. Housing matters.

Families matter because readiness is about sustaining a force, not just generating one. And we're seeing the results: recruitment up, outflow down.

Because if you want a ready force, you have to build a country that supports it. So let me finish, perhaps where I started.

Our people are ready. They are capable. They are delivering.

But readiness is not a fixed state. It is something you build, and you have to rebuild it continuously over time. It runs through everything we do in our Armed Forces, yes, but just as much in our economy, our infrastructure and indeed, the resilience of our society.

You can spend billions in defence, but if the country underneath is not strong, it will not hold.

Our job in this government is to build both a country that is secure and a country that is strong enough to sustain the security. That is what readiness and resilience really mean.

And if we get this wrong, if we fail, we increase the chances of war. Let's be absolutely clear, we increase the chances of conflict by not being ready, and we will, if we don't get it right, find ourselves on the wrong side of history. Thank you.

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