Defence Secretary Wes Streeting Speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies

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The Future of U.S.-UK Defence Cooperation with UK Secretary of Defence Wes Streeting.

Good morning.

Thank you very much for that introduction.

I am happy to bring the sunshine, it's not something that Defence Ministers are generally known for and I can't promise and I can't promise that when I talk about the threat environment we are operating in, we'll continue with that sunny disposition.

I also enjoyed your characterisation of my experience in government, depending on how you look it – I might well understand fiscal pressures in government from the two departments that I've now led.

I think some of my friends in the Treasury would consider me to be personally a major contributor to some of the budget pressures that we face.

I was once described in a previous spending review negotiations as the Katniss Everdeen of the spending review process. One of the reasons why the Prime Minister asked me take on the role of Defence Secretary, at a time when we are investing more, but need to go further.

It's great to be here.

As it says here, good morning.

At least, that is what I am told. My body clock is still negotiating with the time difference.

But as I arrive in Washington, I am absolutely clear about one thing.

There has rarely been a more important time for Britain and America to come together, to think boldly, and to act decisively.

So I'd like to thank our hosts for bringing us together and for bringing together such a wide range of expertise in the room.

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The gravest dangers of the 20th century are returning, armed with the technologies of the 21st.

It is not yet clear if this century will be defined by freedom or tyranny.

Russia is waging war in Europe.

Our adversaries are probing and provoking us on a daily basis.

The threats we face are growing – and getting closer to home.

And the very nature of warfare itself is being transformed before our eyes.

Britain and America have never been content to simply watch history unfold.

At defining moments, we have helped determine its course.

The frontline for freedom today can be found in Ukraine.

Ukraine did not ask for this war. President Putin invaded their country.

Not just four and a half years ago but more than a decade ago, with his invasion of Crimea.

It is not just the history of the 20th century that teaches us that appeasement fails.

That has been our experience with Putin since 2014.

And I saw the consequences of his imperialism first-hand when I visited Kyiv this summer.

The bombed-out shopping centres.

The make-do shelters in underground car parks.

Children's toys lying in the rubble of the homes that Putin's war machine destroyed.

On this side of the Atlantic, the war is even further away from the lives of ordinary Americans than it is from our daily lives back home in London.

But the people of Ukraine are fighting for a principle that runs through the finest traditions of American political thought.

A principle that created the United States and that we have stood for together – once we'd gotten over that messy divorce 250 years ago.

The principle is that a free people have the right to determine their own destiny, and that no nation should live at the mercy of a more powerful neighbour.

But our shared history also teaches us something else.

That defending freedom is not simply a matter of principle. It is a matter of national self-interest.

After the Second World War, President Truman and General Marshall understood that the security of the United States could not be separated from the security of Europe.

And together with Britain and our allies, America helped build the institutions and alliances that would underpin decades of transatlantic security.

From the Marshall Plan to the founding of NATO, these were not simply acts of generosity, they were acts of foresight and national self-interest.

Because that generation learned through bitter experience that the cost of defending peace today, can be far smaller than the price of restoring it tomorrow.

That same lesson should guide us now.

Ukraine may be thousands of miles from American shores.

But if aggression is rewarded, if borders can be redrawn by force, if the sovereignty of nations becomes negotiable, the consequences will not remain confined to Ukraine or to my continent.

So standing with Ukraine is not a choice between our values and our self-interest.

It is a recognition that, ultimately, they are inseparable.

Warfare is as tough and as bloody and as deadly as it has ever been.

But Ukraine has changed the character of conflict forever.

A $650 drone can destroy a $4 million tank.

Uncrewed boats costing a quarter of a million dollars sink warships worth $65 million.

The time between detecting and striking targets has compressed dramatically.

And new technology can be deployed in weeks rather than years.

The lesson is clear.

Military power is no longer measured simply by who has the biggest, most expensive platforms.

It is about who can innovate fastest, produce at scale and turn relatively cheap technology to devastating military effect.

Our competitors are combining industrial scale with rapid advances in autonomy, AI, drones, cyber and electronic warfare.

So modernisation is not just a case of inventing or buying new kit or technology.

Modernisation is about getting affordable, adaptable, accessible weaponry into the hands of our military as quickly as possible.

The old model of procurement that involved defence giants and lengthy specs, tortuous legal compliance, and endless form-filling is obsolete.

We are now in a world where weapons are designed, developed and deployed by engineering firms in the blink of an eye.

And those nations who do not adapt will not only be left behind; they will be left at risk.

That demands improvements to productivity and procurement.

In the UK, we have set ourselves a target to cut the time from concept to contract for new platforms from six years to two; adapting existing ones from three years to one; and for everything else to under three months.

That is because advantage increasingly belongs to those who can learn, iterate, manufacture and field capability fastest.

Innovation requires us to take risks, to learn from setbacks and, when necessary, to fail faster and adapt faster.

The private sector does it every single day.

But this culture does not come naturally to politics.

We operate in an environment where every mistake is magnified, every setback scrutinised, and every failure is tomorrow's headline.

But in a world changing at breakneck speed, the most dangerous words in defence are not 'we tried and failed', but 'we've always done it this way'.

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A new approach is already providing some exciting results.

Faced with an urgent Ukrainian air-defence requirement, instead of a lengthy specification, industry was given a two-sentence operational requirement.

This gave them the space to innovate.

As a result, the RAVEN ground-launched missile system was designed, developed and delivered in four months.

And the total cost of the first eight systems was less than $25 million.

Similarly, our SMEs took designs for one-way attack drones from paper to flight in three months, with systems reaching the frontline in Ukraine within a year.

Deliberately limited technical requirements allowed companies to experiment, make mistakes, correct them, and iterate quickly.

This meant rapid acquisition of essential and effective defence tools that have both saved lives and allowed Ukraine to take the fight to Putin.

Instead of doing the same old things, the same old ways, we rose to the urgent and immediate challenge that faced us.

And by pushing the frontier of defence innovation we are creating and maintaining an advantage over our adversaries.

We are also learning in real time in Ukraine.

Modern warfare requires much shorter feedback loops.

Avengers Lab, Ukraine's breakthrough military AI platform, is doing just that.

It takes combat data from the frontline and converts it to hyper-accurate algorithms that are dramatically improving situational awareness and target identification on the battlefield.

The UK now has access to this data goldmine.

And universities, researchers, and tech firms are using it to co-develop battle-winning AI capabilities

in response.

This illustrates a much bigger purpose.

Not simply to study the lessons of Ukraine after the war, but to connect battlefield experience to our innovation systems while those lessons still matter.

And it is a striking feature of the relationship evolution during the war that we've gone from training the Ukrainians to be being trained by the Ukrainians.

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The transformation of modern warfare presents Britain and America with an extraordinary opportunity.

Not simply to renew our defence partnership, but to help build an alliance fit for the challenges of this century.

Our partnership has been forged through generations of shared history, common purpose, and joint sacrifice.

I firmly believe it remains the strongest and most enduring bilateral relationship anywhere in the world.

But its future cannot run purely on the fumes of nostalgia.

Collaboration on defence innovation can drive our partnership to new heights for the rest of this century.

We have repeatedly proven that UK-US collaboration out-innovates our rivals.

It is not surprising.

We are home to the world's smartest minds, finest universities and most creative companies.

If we pool our resources, we can lead the development of defence technologies in drones, uncrewed vessels at sea, advanced fighter jets and the use of AI.

If the last century of warfare was characterised by our soldiers standing shoulder to shoulder on the battlefield, the next can be defined by our scientists, engineers and businesses working side-by-side in our labs, research institutes and factories.

But there is a bigger ambition here.

Because it's not enough to simply out-innovate our adversaries.

We must out-produce them too.

The ability to invent the most sophisticated weapons means little if you cannot manufacture them in sufficient quantities, replenish your stockpiles, or sustain your forces through a prolonged conflict.

A prototype can demonstrate our ingenuity.

But it is production at scale that turns ingenuity into military power.

The nations that prevail will be those that can innovate at speed, manufacture at scale, and sustain that production for as long as it takes.

That is the challenge facing the entire NATO alliance.

Because an alliance that can mobilise its armies must also be able to mobilise its industries.

Our new Prime Minister, Andy Burnham, sees this as both a responsibility and an opportunity.

Because as the threat environment requires us to deliver the biggest sustained increase in UK defence spending since the end of the Cold War, we have an opportunity to reindustrialise Britain, creating good, well-paid jobs, in every corner of our United Kingdom.

We're proudly backing Britain by buying British – seizing opportunities to buy from those who are creating jobs and growth for us and with us in the UK, including US companies invested in Britain.

But there is plenty of work to go around. And, frankly, a challenge for all of us to broaden and deepen our defence industrial bases – as sovereign countries and as NATO.

It is why I have been urging my European counterparts in recent weeks about the need to avoid healthy competition becoming self-defeating rivalry.

It makes no sense to pitch Buy British against Made in Europe against America First.

It should not be an 'either or' choice.

It should be an 'and also' where all of us benefit in a way that strengthens our collective security as well as our national economies.

Already, the UK's active foreign military sales portfolio with the US exceeds $11 billion.

British industry produces around 15 per cent of each F-35 through more than 100 UK Tier-1 suppliers supporting over 20,000 jobs.

Through AUKUS, US investment in its submarine industrial base is matched by substantial British investment in our Defence Nuclear Enterprise.

Stronger domestic industries and deeper allied integration are not contradictory.

The defining test is not where every component was made.

It is whether our combined industrial base can give our armed forces what they need, when they need it.

And so we need to go further make it easier for technology and expertise to cross the Atlantic.

We need to open up our systems to innovators who have been historically kept out of defence deals.

And by aggregating demand we can give industry the confidence it needs to expand capacity.

Most importantly, given how often and how closely our militaries march side-by-side, interoperability cannot be retrofitted.

UK-US integration can also serve as the model for wider NATO modernisation.

For the United States, the UK is a supportive, serious partner.

We are deeply integrated with you, profoundly committed to NATO, and strongly connected to European security and industry.

The UK is the causeway across the Atlantic that binds together Europe and America – connecting American innovation and scale, with growing European investment and industrial capacity.

NATO remains the cornerstone of Western security.

And we undoubtedly need a stronger Britain in a stronger Europe to build a stronger NATO.

Now, I know there has been frustration here in Washington about Europe's reliance on American military power.

Bluntly, much of that frustration is justified.

President Trump is not the first American President to demand that Europe take greater responsibility for its own defence, nor have those demands been limited to Republican presidents.

But President Trump has brought a new urgency to that challenge, and he has made it impossible for Europe to ignore.

The result is the most significant shift in European defence ambition in a generation.

But I want to be equally clear about Britain's response.

We are not stepping up because America has told us to.

We are stepping up because our national security demands it, our responsibilities require it, and our capability equips us to lead.

We also know that the strongest allies are not those who ask the most of America.

They are those who bring the most to the alliance – and Britain intends to remain among the very strongest.

The UK is the only European ally to commit its nuclear deterrent in full to NATO.

We have over 1,000 military personnel in NATO command posts.

We have taken command of Joint Forces Command Norfolk – and the maritime and special operations components of NATO's Allied Reaction Force.

Several hundred elite British troops have become the spearhead of NATO's highest readiness force.

And the UK is developing NATO's next generation of long-range strike capabilities with our European allies.

We will meet our NATO target to spend 3.5% of GDP on defence by 2035.

But in this age of insecurity, the ultimate measure of success cannot simply be counted only in pounds and pence, or dollars and cents.

Defence spending is the measure of our commitment. Defence capability is the measure of our credibility.

That means matching investment with modernisation.

Because while modernisation without investment is impractical, investment without modernisation is irresponsible.

In times of our greatest peril, Britain and America have shown ourselves capable of achieving great things.

We have stood tall on the world stage.

We have been steadfast in support of our allies.

We have rescued the world from tyranny.

We have matched the courage of those who serve with the ingenuity of those who build.

We can still do all these things – and we will.

Previous generations built a partnership capable of meeting the defining security challenges of their age.

Our responsibility is not simply to match it, but to modernise it.

To make sure that Britain, America and our allies continue to innovate faster than those who threaten us.

That is how this partnership honours its past: by building its future.

Thank you very much.

https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/defence-secretary-wes-streeting-speech-at-the-center-for-strategic-and-international-studies