ANDREW MARR:
Well this weekend EU foreign ministers have been meeting in Lithuania to discuss Syria. Representing the UK at the meeting, after a dreadful few days for British diplomacy, was the Foreign Secretary William Hague who joins me now. Mr Hague, Britain has been diminished by the parliamentary vote on Syria, hasn’t it? It must feel like that?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well it wasn’t the vote the Government sought, but we have to make sure that Britain isn’t diminished. And you saw the Prime Minister very busy at the G20 Summit, convening the meetings about the humanitarian aid to Syria. I have been meeting the Syrian opposition - the ones who are neither the regime, nor the extremists, there are some good people there in Syria - because without them we can’t get the political solution that we all need on Syria.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) But on the crucial question …

WILLIAM HAGUE:
So it was a defeat for the Government, but there are many other aspects to our Syria policy that we must continue with.

ANDREW MARR:
I wonder how much you really want to intervene militarily in Syria, you want us to be part of this?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well the Government put forward its case. We were of course going to come back to Parliament. Again that was part of what we were putting to the House of Commons - that we would have a second vote - so we had made no final decision about that. I do believe very strongly the world must stand up to the use of chemical weapons. That is the debate now taking place in the US Congress since our Parliament has spoken, but it is very important and the risks of not doing so in my view are greater than the risks of doing so in a limited and proportionate and careful way.

ANDREW MARR:
You see that being so, what a lot of people can’t understand is why you immediately said, all of you - the Prime Minister and then yourself and Philip Hammond - we’re never going back to Parliament on this. I mean if it’s so important, why not go back, have the courage to take your argument again - say the facts have changed, the evidence is greater, and have another go if it’s so important?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well we are democrats and Parliament has spoken, so we are not planning to go back again.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Parliament speaks every other week.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
But, as Philip Hammond said, if circumstances change dramatically, then of course everybody would be looking at things in a different light. But you know Parliament has spoken. There was a great reluctance for MPs to vote even for the rather mild
motion that we were putting forward. The opposition behaved, I have to say, in a rather opportunistic and partisan way, and …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Oppositionist. They are the opposition.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Yes, but on issues of this kind, on issues … major issues of international peace and security, opposition should be able to rise above that, and so there would be no guarantee on a future occasion that they would not behave in that way again.

ANDREW MARR:
Because you couldn’t win your own people over either; and, judging by public opinion, the Labour Party was speaking for the majority of people in this country on this occasion rather than yourselves.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
I’m not sure the Labour Party has decided what it was actually saying on that occasion, But there is a lot of public unease about intervention overseas, let us recognise that, and then you’ve been discussing it this morning, it’s there in opinion polls, you hear it if you go talking to people around the country. And to that, I say be reassured that we have learnt lessons of Iraq. We are not seeking to be drawn into wars in the Middle East. We now make decisions in a completely different way.

ANDREW MARR:
So no question of trying to change the momentum of the war, as the American Republicans have been saying? No question of trying to topple Assad? It was never part of that. It was only the limited matter of chemical weapons?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
This issue is about chemical weapons, which is a bigger issue than Syria. And what the United States has been talking about, what we were talking about before the vote in Parliament, was a limited and proportionate response to the use of chemical weapons, to try to deter the use of chemical weapons. So I think people should be
reassured about that. And we’re not a government that is gung ho about military action. You know in most of the world’s trouble spots that we’re working hard on like Somalia or on Mali, we’re actually financing, Europe is financing African forces to do the work on the ground and we help with development work and diplomacy. And that is the model that we’re pursuing wherever we can; not sending British troops into harm’s way.

**ANDREW MARR:**
See what I’m trying to get to is whether we are at a real turning point in terms of the balance of power in the world where we’ve got this very hard Russian and Chinese veto being applied pretty ruthlessly in St. Petersburg and at the same time we have Western public opinion in America and in Britain very, very reluctant to intervene in the old way, and so the unipolar world is over.

**WILLIAM HAGUE:**
Well this is a good question. And I think certainly the unipolar world that briefly was there at the end of the Cold War has gone and I think if no-one … if it is decided in the various parliaments of the world that no-one will stand up to the use of chemical weapons and take any action about that, that will be a very alarming moment in the affairs of the world. But I would say to the British public, as well as be reassured in the way that I just described, we mustn’t ourselves turn in on ourselves, we mustn’t turn away from the rest of the world. It doesn’t mean we should be overextended militarily, it doesn’t mean we should be anything other than very careful about using our military power, but Britain has great and positive influence in the world and we must make sure that we retain that - partly for the reasons you were asking about.

**ANDREW MARR:**
And yet, after this we matter a bit less.

**WILLIAM HAGUE:**
Well time will tell over that actually. I am very determined, as the Prime Minister is, that Britain will not matter less. Britain matters in enormous ways. We are ranked and we’ve been ranked over the last year in every survey as the first or second most
influential country in the world taking everything into account. We have the fourth biggest military budget …

ANDREW MARR:

(over) Maybe we’ve slipped down a bit.

WILLIAM HAGUE:

(over) … one of the biggest development budgets, one of the biggest diplomatic networks, which I’m expanding at the moment with less money. I am opening embassies and consulates that the Labour Government closed, so that we’re connected up to more of the fast growing markets and economies in the world. So I am very determined that Britain won’t matter less.

ANDREW MARR:

So were you offended or surprised by Peskov’s comments, reported comments about “small country, no-one listens to them.”

WILLIAM HAGUE:

Well these were reported comments … I think we should always point out …

ANDREW MARR:

(over) Of course.

WILLIAM HAGUE:

… that the Russians denied making those comments. But I think the Prime Minister gave an absolutely brilliant response to that about the great merits of our small island and our nation and, as I say, I believe in that very strongly. We are a country that still move the dial in world affairs.

ANDREW MARR:

(over) But it must be embarrassing. St. Petersburg cannot have been a pleasant experience for any of you?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well these things, some of these international events when we are debating Syria are of course very heavy going for all concerned. You wouldn’t call them wholly pleasant occasions. We are dealing with the deaths of tens of thousands of people, a diplomatic solution that has eluded the whole world, so yes they are difficult. But the United Kingdom came together at that summit, thanks to the work of the Prime Minister to promote new humanitarian initiatives, and with other countries, to say that there has to be a strong international response to the use of chemical weapons.

ANDREW MARR:
How concerned are you about the way that President Putin is behaving and the lack of rapport with either David Cameron or indeed President Obama? There seems to be something really pretty icy and difficult in the air at the moment.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well there often is a rapport. It’s slightly different from rapport. The Prime Minister and President Putin have long conversations and often friendly, friendly but frank conversations.

ANDREW MARR:
Friendly but frank means hostile. (laughs)

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well no, it doesn’t mean … No it means in this case exactly what … I mean I know that is often diplomatic speak - friendly but hostile - but actually I don’t mean that in this case. He does engage with the Prime Minister. They have long talks about Syria. The Prime Minister went to Sochi earlier in the year specifically to try to make a diplomatic breakthrough with Russia. Now we don’t, however, succeed in that - or the Russians, as they see it, don’t succeed with us on that - because in the end Russia gives backing to the Assad regime, diplomatically protects the Assad regime - for instance at the UN Security Council - so we’re not able to agree on requiring peace in Syria, on the United Nations doing what it should be doing about it, but we will keep trying.

ANDREW MARR:
Coming back to the main argument on Syria, can I put it to you that actually you didn’t lose the vote in the House of Commons in the country or the opinion polls in the country because of lack of evidence; that it was really the question of what’s next? That once you fire tomahawk missiles, you may or not hit some sites, they may or may not hit some chemical weapon sites and biological, but what do you do then? And there was really no answer to that, and that perhaps public opinion was wise on this occasion to spot that?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
It is an entirely fair question and of course it’s often difficult for people contemplating doing these things to answer all those questions because you can’t give away all the plans in the event of a military strike.

ANDREW MARR:
Were there good plans this time? I’m thinking of Iraq. Were there, unlike Iraq, good plans this time?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
I think that those lessons have been learnt. Now, when the United Kingdom contemplates anything like this, we have a National Security Council. The Prime Minister and I, the Defence Secretary, the other ministers sit with the intelligence experts, with the Chief of the Defence staff. So far government has completely gone. We have good plans, we have properly minuted meetings, and we take into account all the evidence. But the other … Going back to your earlier question of what next - people also have to ask themselves if the world does not confront the use of chemical weapons, then what next?

ANDREW MARR:
So you must be thinking about what happens now, what happens to Assad now? Clearly we do all we can to help on the humanitarian side, but your view will presumably still be that Assad has to be got rid of one way or another?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well I can’t see how Syria can be governed, can be held together in the future with President Assad there, who has now presided over the death of more than a hundred thousand people and terrible torture and abuse. For that country to hold together, there has to be some sort of political settlement, and I can’t see that he could be part of it. But that’s up to Syrians in the end.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Yes.

**WILLIAM HAGUE:**
What we want is what was agreed in Geneva last year: a transitional government drawn from the regime and the opposition and the introduction of democracy in Syria. You would think they would be able to agree on that after so much death and slaughter, but sadly they’re not yet at that stage.

**ANDREW MARR:**
Again part of the trouble is that so many people on the opposition side are clearly not, as it were, good guys. There’s a hideous picture in the papers this week …

**WILLIAM HAGUE:**
There is, yes.

**ANDREW MARR:**
… of people being lined up naked and shot in the back of the head. It looked like something happening in Vilnius in 1942, frankly.

**WILLIAM HAGUE:**
Yes.

**ANDREW MARR:**
And so a lot of British people see these pictures and they think well actually if this is a kind of civil war with evil characters on both sides, we must not get involved. And that was also crucial.
WILLIAM HAGUE:
I think that does affect public opinion in Western countries and terrible things to happen on both sides, but that does not mean that everybody in Syria is evil. Of course there are, as in any country, there are millions of people who just want peace and democracy and freedom for their country, and we have to make sure that they are not eliminated, that they have a role, otherwise there won’t be a peace for Syria. And so they’re the people we send equipment to. We don’t send lethal equipment, we don’t send arms, but we do send them equipment that saves lives.

ANDREW MARR:
It’s very hard to look round the corner, of course, but we had Max Hastings here talking about the world in 1914 and thinking about what’s going on at that end of the Mediterranean with Egypt now in terrible turmoil as well. How great is the fear of a bigger conflagration with Russians involved, Iranians involved, starting in Syria and then getting much wider or out of control?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well no, I think the real fear is of these processes going on a long time, of revolutions that take decades - throwing up a lot of turbulence, civil wars along the way, sometimes bringing interven… Syria has already brought foreign intervention, Iranian and Hezbollah intervention into Syria. I don’t think Russia wants to see an escalation of the powers from outside that region, including Russia, getting more and more deeply drawn into it even though they do protect the Assad regime. So I would put it a different way: it is a concern over the impact on the world of such long-term instability in the Arab world. But again we mustn’t be put off by that from keeping faith with millions of people in the Arab world who want the dignity and freedom that we have in our own country. We have to keep faith with them and not think that they’re all evil …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Evil extremists.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
… or they’re all fanatics because actually yes sometimes these countries have those people …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) By and large …

WILLIAM HAGUE:
(over) … but the great majority of people are not like that.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) … the trouble is internal. By and large the large the bad guys come to the top and get into power. And we also have the problem … You were saying that there’s not going to be a kind of wider confrontation in the Middle East, but President Putin has made it very clear that he wants to back the Assad regime all the way. I mean if we send missiles, he’ll send anti-missile batteries and so on, so there is a danger of the Russians becoming involved surely?

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well there are many risks in all directions, as I say. There is no risk free course of action about a situation as difficult as Syria and foreign policy is a choice not between the perfect course of action and the dreadful one, but between the balance of risk and the lesser of evils. And from everything I’ve seen as Foreign Secretary, I believe that allowing the spread and use of chemical weapons in the 21st century is an evil that we have to stand up to one way or another. On that point …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So I say to you go back, go back to Parliament and fight the argument again.

WILLIAM HAGUE:
Well again I go back to the point our Parliament has spoken, you know, and I think we’re very clear about that. It is now, therefore, up to other parliaments and they are about to speak.

ANDREW MARR:
Foreign Secretary, thank you very much.

INTERVIEW ENDS