ANDREW MARR SHOW
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MICHAEL FALLON

AM: The Russians are probing NATO airspace in the Baltic, they’re pushing ahead with the redeployment of crucial missiles, warning of a looming nuclear war, and according to Boris Johnson, committing war crimes in Syria. In brief, what is our response to all of this beyond wringing hands? Mr Fallon joins me now. Is it simply wringing our hands and protesting?

MF: No, we’re doing a lot now to strengthen NATO. I think we were right, if you see the deployment now of missiles in Kaliningrad, very close to Berlin, we were right to agree to further assurance measures, to put troops next year into Estonia and into Poland, and to encourage other countries in NATO to meet the two per cent target that we’re meeting ourselves.

AM: Can I just step back for a second and ask you about your view of Mr Putin and Russia’s current stance? Because almost everywhere you look the Russians are pushing up against us. They’re coming into our airspace, they’re challenging – the Americans have just accused them of interfering in the American Presidential campaign, for the very first time. It feels like we have not been in a more difficult position vis-a-vis the Russians and the Russian leader since way back into the Cold War.

MF: It’s extremely concerning. We’re seeing a much more aggressive Russia. We hoped Russia would become a partner to us in the west, but clearly Russia has decided to be a competitor. They said right at the beginning they were going to come in and help fight Daesh. They haven’t done that. They’ve been helping Assad bomb his own people. They’ve been flexing their muscles in the Black Sea, they’ve been militarising the Crimea, we’ve seen this pressure on the Baltic states. And they’ve tried to interfere in elections. They even tried to interfere in the Dutch referendum on the Ukraine association agreement.
AM: So is this not a moment when we in the west have to, as it were, rethink and reassess our own defence capabilities? From 2010 till very recently our defence budget was going down quite substantially. It’s eight per cent down. When I started doing this programme we always had more than 100,000 troops, we’re now down to 80-odd thousand and falling. And a lot of our defence chiefs are saying we are simply not big enough and strong enough in the defence department.

MF: No, that’s not right. Our troops aren’t falling in number now. The cuts that were imposed, necessarily, in 2010 when the budget was in a mess, have stopped now. In fact, we’re increasing the numbers in the navy and in the air force and our defence review last year committed us to a huge programme of investment in our armed forces. We’re building aircraft carriers, we’re adding more planes. And we’re adding more equipment for special forces. We’re building our defences up again. And crucially, we’re meeting the two per cent target. So the real answer to Putin is that we should stay strong and be strong.

AM: Sir Richard Dannatt, who you know very well, a former chief of the general staff, says: ‘we’re trying to be a big player but we haven’t got the resources that we used to have by a very long way.’ In other words, the cuts before have gone so far that you as Defence Secretary have to do even more to rebuild things.

MF: Well, we have the fifth biggest defence budget in the world. Some of the best armed forces in the world. And we’re determined to go on playing an international role. Now, every ex-chief I’ve come across says that, you know, they would rather we did more and spent more. But I think it’s to the credit of this government that in difficult financial times under the Cameron government, defence spending is now increasing again. My budget went up in April. It’s going to go on going up every year of this parliament. And we will meet the two per cent.
AM: I’m not going to quote you endless defence chiefs, one more, General Sir Richard Barrons.

MF: There are plenty of them.

AM: Former joint task force commander. And he said in the FT, ‘neither the UK homeland,’ that’s us, ‘nor a deployed force could be protected from a concerted Russian air effort. Key capabilities such as radar, fire control systems and missile stocks, are deficient. Is the right?

MF: Well, we wouldn’t be defending ourselves against Russia on our own. That’s the whole point of being in the NATO alliance and having collective defence. Now, General Sir Richard Barrons, a friend of mine, was part of the defence review - he agreed it last year - when we agreed a new programme of investment in our armed forces. We’re one of only four countries in the world building aircraft carriers.

AM: I guess my basic question to you, as a Conservative Defence Secretary, are you inside government asking for still more? In other words, these are very difficult times financially, we all understand that. But they’re very dangerous times as well. Are you going back to the Treasury and saying, ‘do you know what, we need to do even more’?

MF: Well I’m absolutely held into the commitment that our budget will go up in real terms each year of this parliament. And we will go on meeting the two per cent. But my job is also, of course, to make sure the money we get is spent wisely and we invest in the right things.

AM: Aleppo, absolutely hideous scenes, attacks on children, being slaughtered. Non-combatants, women, all kinds. Apart from wringing our hands and protesting at the United Nations is there anything that we can practically do to help these people?

MF: Well, we are working in the United Nations, in fact a resolution was vetoed by Russia the other day.

AM: There you go.
MF: We’re continuing to work for a political settlement in Syria, but in the end if Russia is determined to prolong this civil war, is actually conniving with the regime’s bombing of civilians and may indeed have been bombing civilians themselves –

AM: Boris Johnson suggested that they were guilty of war crimes.

MF: Well, I would endorse that. It looks as if they did target that particular convoy, and if that can be established, then yes, they ought to be held accountable.

AM: But you know, apart from resolutions being vetoed in the UN, is there anything else we can do? There’s no way of getting corridors in to get people out, to try to rescue some of the civilian population before they are slaughtered?

MF: Well, some aid is getting through Very little is getting through, not much. But some is getting through. We will continue to work on that. It’s impossible to have safe zones if we can’t be sure that our planes won’t be attacked by Russia in the air, for example. But we’re going to continue to work at it, and huge progress is being made against the Daesh, for example, over in Iraq.

AM: You mentioned just now our reliance on NATO. I can’t remember an American Presidential candidate as chilly to lukewarm on NATO as Donald Trump. Are you worried about some of the things that he’s being saying about NATO?

MF: Well, I was in Washington when he made those particular remarks about NATO. But every American President has understood the importance of NATO. It is a defensive alliance, we help each other collectively, and I’m quite sure whoever is elected will abide by that particular mandate.

AM: Since we’re talking about him, what do you make of the recent remarks and the huge hullaballoo about them? Is this a man who is fit to be American President?
MF: Well, we have to be very careful not to comment on other people’s elections, because we have to respect democracy and we have to work with whoever wins.

AM: Go on.

MF: You’re tempting me.

AM: I am tempting now.

MF: No, no. We have to work with whoever wins. I’m not going to intervene in the US election. But I will of course emphasise that in NATO we are all in it together.

AM: Okay, well there’s one area where you have intervened or said you’re going to intervene. Two sovereign countries which are friendly to us, France and Germany, have talked about pooling their armed forces as the nucleus of a new European Army. And you have said that so long as we are inside the EU we will veto that. Given that we’re a sovereign country trying to reassert our sovereignty by coming out of the EU, where is our possible moral authority to veto them?

MF: Well, there’s no support for an EU army right across the European Union. When we discussed this in Bratislava a couple of weeks ago there were plenty of other countries who were opposed to pooling their forces. Poland, Sweden, the Baltic states, they don’t want to merge their armed forces. And in fact, Germany doesn’t. What they’re looking for is some kind of operational headquarters in Brussels, which we think would simply duplicate what NATO already does.

AM: Do you accept that effectively these days it’s none of our business anymore?

MF: No, we’re full members of the European Union until we leave the European Union. We have the biggest defence budget in Europe, the largest navy, the most capable armed forces. And, even after we’ve left we will still be committed to the security of what is our continent. That’s why we’re putting troops onto its
eastern border next year to help defend against any Russian aggression.

AM: You said during the referendum campaign – and I always had you marked down as a bit of a Brexiteer on the quiet – but you said it would make Putin happy if we left because it would weaken the EU. And now we have a proposal inside the EU from two big sovereign countries to try to strengthen their defence capability, presumably against the Russians and so forth, and I just don’t understand why we’re trying to frustrate them.

MF: Well, NATO is the cornerstone of our defence. I happen to believe that staying in Europe would have added a bit to that, because the EU can impose sanctions in a way that NATO couldn’t. But it is NATO really we mustn’t undermine. And my objection to this EU headquarters proposal is it would simply duplicate what we’re already doing in NATO.

MF: Okay, we’ve been talking about Brexit already, the overall impression from the papers and everyone we’ve been talking to, is that in the Conservative Party Conference the thing that we learned is that the so-called soft Brexit, in other words trying somehow by the back door to stay inside a single European market without tariffs, that has gone. Would you accept that?

MF: No. I think Theresa May set out very clearly, we’re not doing a running commentary, but she updated the party and the country by setting a timetable for Brexit, the markets wanted to know that.

AM: So those options are still there?

MF: Well, hang on. She also made clear as to what’s going to happen with European law. That’s going to be returned to our parliament and our courts at the moment that we exit. And she also laid out three objectives of the negotiation that’s now about to start. You know, first that there should be full cooperation on security, counter-terrorism and law enforcement. Secondly that we should maximise free trade in goods and services with the
remaining 27, and thirdly that we should regain control over immigration. Those are the objectives of this negotiation. And the precise negotiation of course is now what’s going to happen.

AM: So it is still conceivable that we would stay as a member of the single market?
MF: No, what we’ve said is we want to maximise free trade in goods and services with the European countries with whom we already do quite a considerable amount of trade at the moment.

AM: I’m still confused. Is it dead or not, the single market as far we’re concerned?
MF: Well, this is Brexit. This is full Brexit, if you like, we’re going to be outside the European Union, but we still, because it’s over 40 per cent of our trade, we still want to maximise our trade with it.

AM: One final question: again looking at today’s papers you see soft-Brexiteers briefing against hard-Brexiteers and vice versa. This is terribly damaging to the Cabinet presumably. What is your message to briefers on both sides?
MF: Well, we are all Brexiteers now. We’re respecting the decision of the British people and we’ve got to make a success of it.
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