ANDREW MARR SHOW
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MICHAEL FALLON

AM: We’ve seen images of – of British troops and others arriving. Why were we so late?

MF: Well, first of all we weren’t late, we pre-positioned a ship in the Caribbean for the hurricane season. It wasn’t by chance that Mounts Bay, a huge 16,000-tonne aid ship, with Marines, with a helicopter, with pallets of aid, was already in the Caribbean. She’s already been helping Anguilla, she’s already moved on to help the British Virgin Islands. Now, it wasn’t until Thursday when we were clear about the – where most help was needed and when we were clear which airfields were usable, then we started the airlifts. Three flights went in on Friday, two went in yesterday, three more are going in today. We’re putting in troops, we’re putting in additional helicopters, pallets of aid backed by police, medics and engineers.

AM: We saw those pictures on the news of landing craft arriving on white beaches which were said to be Anguilla, but somebody from Anguilla, Dot Hodges there, says that nobody has actually landed. Have we landed in Anguilla?

MF: Absolutely. Mounts Bay was on Anguilla first and has restored power on Anguilla and has helped deal with the fuel situation there as well. Mounts Bay was then able to move on to the British Virgin Islands, has started to provide assistance there. There are troops on the British Virgin Islands today, 120 troops are already there. Our task force is established under a Brigadier, there are 500 British troops in the region now.

AM: How big is the looting problem on the British Virgin Islands?

MF: There has been a security issue there, that’s why we’re now prioritising getting armed troops in and police coming in behind them to strengthen the local police force. You can understand that the island has been devastated, it’s been difficult for people to
move around until you get helicopters there, but there are troops now there assisting the Governor to ensure that law and order is maintained.

AM: And yet there have been quite a lot of voices from the islands, and indeed in Parliament as well – Lord Naseby, one of your colleagues in the House of Lords and Tom Tugendhat, of the Defence Select Committee, have both said that our response has been too slow and slower than France, slower than Holland.

MF: Well, that’s not true. The French didn’t have any kind of ship like Mounts Bay, they had a couple of light frigates there. There had the advantage of having troops, they garrison their overseas territories, so they had troops already in position. We have local police forces on these islands. But our response has been as good as anybody else’s, and indeed I can tell you the French have asked now for our assistance in helping to lift troops and material to some of their islands.

AM: So Tom Tugendhat is simple wrong when he says, “Our response has been found wanting, requires improvement. There’s been an apparent lack of forward thinking?”

MF: No, I don’t accept that. Mounts Bay was not there by chance. We pre-positioned our ship there to help on the islands. She’s already been helping on the islands, and as soon as we were clear which airfields could be used we then got our flights in. We have troops helping at the moment.

AM: Let’s move on to North Korea now if we could. Because we’ve seen some very, very worrying pictures and images, and we’ve heard these words about “fire and fury like the world has never seen,” being threatened by Donald Trump. How concerned as you, as a senior Minister observing this, about what’s going on at the moment?

MF: We’re very concerned about it and we’re not just observing it, we’re working extremely closely with the United States. The Prime
Minister reviewed this with the President on Tuesday. I keep in touch the whole time. I spoke to the American Defence Secretary. We’re doing now what we can to bring about a diplomatic solution. What we have to avoid at all costs is this spilling over into any kind of military conflict. So we’re working flat out at the United Nations to get a better resolution there, to enforce the existing sanctions, we’re looking at sanctions across the European Union, and of course we’re trying to persuade China to keep its neighbour in check.

AM: Are we, in your judgement, quite close to a war in the Pacific?

MF: Well, I’m very concerned with the situation in the Pacific. The United States is fully entitled to defend its own territory to defend its bases and to look after its people. But this involves us. London is closer to North Korea and its missiles, that Los Angeles.

AM: So we should be – and do you believe that North Korea has a ballistic missile capable of hitting London?

MF: Not yet. But they are clearly accelerating their missile programme. The range is getting longer and longer, and we have to get this programme halted because the dangers now of miscalculation, of some accident triggering a response, are extremely great. So we’ve got to work at this problem and bring about a diplomatic solution that stops the development of North Korea’s nuclear programme and enforces the sanctions that we have at the moment.

AM: Because quite a lot of people watching will say, “well, of course it’s terribly worrying, it’s terribly dangerous, but it’s the other side of the world, doesn’t directly involve us.” When I asked Mr Stoltenberg about whether NATO was involved if the North Koreans attacked Guam – because I think Article 5 says that we defend each other if it’s in Northern Europe, if it’s in Europe or North America. And Guam is clearly neither but it is an American
dependency. He interestingly wouldn’t give me an answer, suggesting that actually Article 5, NATO’s Article 5, might have to be invoked if that happened.

MF: Well, Guam is part of the United States, it’s United States sovereign territory, and the United States, of course, under the United Nations, has the right to ask other members of the United Nations to join in its self-defence. So I don’t think the legal issue is nearly as important as getting a diplomatic solution to this crisis.

AM: Let me ask you about the Russians as well, because I was talking to Mr Stoltenberg about those big Zapad-2017 exercises the Russians are about to start in the west of Russia and in Belarus. What do you think is going on there?

MF: Well, this is the biggest exercise, I think, for four years, you know, over 100,000 Russian and Belorussian troops are now on NATO’s border. This is designed to provoke us, it’s designed to test our defences, and that’s why we have to be strong. We have a British battle group in Estonia now, we have other NATO troops in the other Baltic states and in Poland. I’ve sent RAF Typhoons this year down to Romania to help secure the south-eastern flank of NATO. Russia is testing us, and testing us now at every opportunity. We’re seeing a more aggressive Russia, we have to deal with that. We have to deal with Daesh terrorism, and we have to keep our eye on North Korea as well.

AM: Well, let me bring you to yet another issue, which is Tony Blair today, as you’ve seen, is suggesting that we could have a different regime on migration inside the EU which would allow us to stay in. Do you welcome his intervention?

MF: Well, it’s a bit late now, this epiphany. I’m not sure where he’s been, well we know where he’s been he’s been travelling the world. The country wants proper controls over immigration. We’ve seen that in election after election, and we saw that in the referendum last year. The country’s taken its decision. We’re
leaving the European Union now, and that means freedom of movement has to end, whether we like it or not. So there are now going to be restrictions, and Tony Blair has to accept that now. There’ve got to be restrictions on those coming here. I think it’s a pity he didn’t think of that when all these new countries were admitted to the European Union on his watch.

AM: But if there was a way of persuading the other members of the EU to introduce a new regime, at least for us, do you think that could possibly allow us to stay inside the EU?  
MF: No. The country’s decided we’re leaving the European Union. We’ve got to get on with that, Tony Blair’s got to get over it, and we’ve got to get a smooth and successful exit from the Union. But that will involve some proper controls over immigration. I think that’s what the country wants to see.

AM: He also says in this article that senior members of the government know that Brexit is going to be a real problem, even a disaster for this country, but are too frightened to say so except in private.  
MF: Well, Brexit is a huge challenge. We’ve got to reverse 40 years of integration into the European Union, covering all the different sectors, whether it’s agriculture, fisheries, trade, even security and fighting terrorism. That’s a huge exercise that we’re now engaged in and we’ve got to achieve successfully. But a decision has been taken and there are opportunities that will open up as a result.

AM: Let me ask about, since I’ve got you here as a senior member of the government, which is that the government is changing the rules in the House of Commons to give itself a majority on all those relevant standing committees which discuss Brexit legislation, even though you haven’t got an overall majority in the House of Commons, and that breaks lots of conventions and both
Labour and the Liberal Democrats are crying ‘foul’. Are you not in danger of poisoning the atmosphere in Parliament?

MF: No, there’s a wonderfully synthetic argument going on about this. Labour did exactly the same when they had a minority government in the 1970s. We have a majority, in principle, on the second reading of the main votes in the House of Commons, and the main votes after the committee stage. It would be absurd not to have a majority on the committees that look at the detail, because you then spent night after night reversing votes in the committees. This is something the Labour government did when they were in the same position in the 1970s.

AM: They simply say it isn’t fair, you know, that you haven’t got this overall majority –

MF: Well, we have. We have an overall majority.

AM: With the DUP.

MF: With the DUP, for our legislation. And you know, it wouldn’t be reasonable to have lots of votes in a committee room upstairs that then have to be reversed when you take the Bill back downstairs. So this is very synthetic opposition from Labour. But parliament will vote on this on Tuesday night and I’m sure we’ll have it dealt with.

AM: Sir Michael Fallon, thanks very much indeed for talking to us.
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