AM: A little earlier I spoke to the Chief of the Defence Staff Sir Stuart Peach and I asked him whether he thought Remembrance Sunday had particular significance in this dangerous and turbulent year.

SP: I think it does. Every year we pause as a nation to reflect, to remember those who were lost in the world wars and in, of course in recent conflicts. I think this year, as you say, it’s a turbulent time. People will reflect with a little bit more edge. Of course, around the world we have over five thousand servicemen in 26 countries on operations. They will also reflect and remember those who went before. This year I think specifically both the memory of the battle of the Somme 100 years ago, and the terrible losses. And of course the times of reconciliation and redemption that I think characterised the services in the sum-up. And importantly the battle of Jutland, which of course we remembered, 100 years ago, in Orkney. And for me it was a real privilege to be part of that service. It was very moving, and of course it also demonstrated the reconciliation that exists now between the UK and Germany as close allies ever since the Second World War.

AM: Can I move on and ask you what you make of President-elect Donald Trump’s comments about NATO, which appear to be quite sceptical, even menacing, about the alliance?

SP: Well, the Prime Minister’s sent her congratulations and best wishes to President-elect Trump. I of course, as the head of the armed forces, will reflect on the depth and breadth and the relationship between the UK armed forces and the United States armed forces. And I would say by beginning that today our thoughts and prayers go to the United States armed forces who tragically lost people yesterday in Bagram, in Afghanistan. And that
relationship between the UK and the United States armed forces is very important. We’re together on operations around the world, we’re together in support of NATO, and we’re together in many other areas of endeavour, as we have been through both the First World War – it’s worth reflecting, I think, that in 2017 it’ll be 100 years since the United States forces came into Europe.

AM: Yes, absolutely. And yet, President Trump has said in terms that most other countries in NATO are not paying their fair share. And he has suggested during the campaign that because of that he might not come to the aid of NATO members who are attacked if they weren’t paying their part of the bill.

SP: Well, the United Kingdom, at two per cent of GDP, meets the NATO target. One of only four nations to do so. With 60 billion dollars a year spent on defence, we’re the second largest contributor in NATO, and the largest in the European Union. We will continue to be the cornerstone nation in NATO working with the United States.

AM: But do you think that for other European members of NATO in particular there is now a new obligation to up their defence spending to meet what President-elect Trump has said is an unfair balance of resources between the European members of NATO and others on the one hand, and the United States on the other.

SP: Well, many nations will make their own choices according to their own economic circumstances. The guidelines from NATO are quite clear, and we meet those guidelines with two per cent.

AM: In short, you’re not worried.

SP: I’m always concerned that we present a united front as an alliance, because the role of NATO is to provide collective security and to project stability.

AM: The reason I press this that the head of NATO, Mr Stoltenberg has said this weekend that he is concerned that the Americans, well Trump doesn’t entirely understand the importance
of NATO, not just to the Western world but to America as well. And that the European members of NATO, including Britain, have to persuade Mr Trump that NATO really matters.

SP: Well, that’s for the Secretary General to discuss with the United States’ government. I’m very clear that the armed forces in the United Kingdom are the cornerstone of the alliance. We play a leading role in a number of missions and will continue to do so.

AM: The other thing that’s come out of all of this over the last few days is that Mr Junker in Brussels has said that this increases the need for a European army, and the French and the Germans and others must get on to create a new European force. Now, in Britain we’ve been hostile to that. Well, certainly politicians have been hostile to that. I wonder, as a military man do you regard the idea of a separate European army and presumably air force and navy as a threat or something that’s quite a good opportunity for us?

SP: Well, I don’t think the specific proposal – we’re not – I mean, the word hostile is perhaps – I wouldn’t agree with. We do not support duplication. That is my – our collective position, is not to have a duplicate structure, duplicate headquarters and duplicate forces. NATO remains the collective security organisation and has done for almost 70 years.

AM: But we’re in a strange position where the Americans may be turning their back slightly on NATO and the Europeans want to build up their own army and Mr Junker has been very explicit about this. Does that not leave Britain kind of dangling unhappily in between?

SP: Not at all. We remain committed to the European Union as a member at present, and I predict that in the future we’ll be committed to a role in support of security in Europe.

AM: Can I ask about the Russian threat, if it is a threat? We have the new Russian battle tank, supposed to be better than anything
that we have got on our side of the border. They’ve got new nuclear missiles coming on board. They seem to be spending lots and lots of money at the moment. There’s new kit coming on air all the time. And at the same time we are not spending at that kind of level. Is there a danger of us being a sort of slightly rusting Maginot line for the 21st century?

SP: No, the Strategic Defence Review – Strategic Defence and Security Review last year made clear that at two per cent we’ll continue to modernise our armed forces. Russia is also, as you said, embarked on a modernisation programme. I would use the phrase strategic completion. There’s a strategic competition between NATO as the western military alliance and Russia. And therefore it’s important that we continue to modernise our capability and ensure its inter-operable with our NATO allies, and we’re doing precisely that. With maritime investment, investment in air systems and investment in land systems.

AM: You mentioned the two per cent a moment ago. The Defence Select Committee earlier this year said that actually that two per cent figure is a little bit dodgy. Dodgy wasn’t the word they used, they said it was massaged or something like that, because we have included pensions and we’ve included a lot of intelligence gathering into that figure. Do you think that is a fair figure that we’re actually using?

SP: The UK abides by the NATO defence planning rules, is the very simple answer. And actually things like intelligence gathering are very much part of military capability.

AM: In the new world where we have Russia spending so heavily and America not wanting to spend so heavily, don’t we have to increase our defence spending even further beyond the two per cent we’re doing?

SP: Well, we’re trying to. We’re already embarked on a 178 billion pound equipment programme. We’re modernising our submarine force. We’re modernising our frigates and destroyers. We’re
building new patrol vessels. We’re investing in the F35 programme, which is the world’s most advanced fighter, including a significant investment into the UK economy for repair and overhaul. We’re investing in new intelligence surveillance reconnaissance capabilities. We’re upgrading our Challenger tanks to make them relative and competitive in that strategic competition I mentioned earlier. We’re in addition, and perhaps unusually now, investing quite heavily in cyber defences, which is an important part of warfare. So I think overall we remain highly competitive.

AM: You mentioned collaboration after Brexit earlier on. And in the German parliament there’s been a lot of talk about this recently. Particularly important for them that they carry on sharing intelligence with the UK. Do you think that’s one of our cards, as it were, in the post-EU world for us to carry on close cooperation with continental countries as well?

SP: It's very important. Of course we share intelligence, the scourge of terrorism requires us to share intelligence on terrorists. And of course we have a historic role to play in sharing intelligence on military capabilities, developed through the Cold War and sustained ever since. For example, in the NATO operation in Afghanistan it’s vital that all the NATO nations participate in sharing intelligence. It’s one of the tenets of modern warfare.

AM: So whatever happens to politics that goes on. Now, a year ago, your predecessor, Sir Nicholas Houghton, said that he was concerned about Jeremy Corbyn’s reluctance to press the nuclear trigger. Since then there’s more and more evidence coming out that our Trident submarines are soon going to be obsolete in terms of being able to be spotted. We have new drones, we have satellite technology, and the idea that submarines could vanish beneath the waves and no one would know where they are is, as I say, becoming obsolete. Are we not in danger of spending a
huge amount of money on a weapons system that is no longer really going to be fit for purpose in 10 or 20 years’ time? And therefore Jeremy Corbyn is right about this?

SP: No. I don’t agree with that. The way you characterise the changing nature of the technology. Each of those technologies is of course a capability in its own right. But collectively the submarine, when updated – and we are committed to update the new class of submarines, as has been announced following a vote in parliament – will remain highly capable well into this century.

AM: But if they can be spotted, and they can now be spotted with these new technology satellites –

SP: That’s not proven.

AM: Not proven.

SP: Not proven.

AM: If they could be they wouldn’t really be very useful any more because then people would know where they were.

SP: The point is that the submarine is not the only form of military capability. There are many layers of protection around a deterrent force, around a submarine, and there are many elements of operations that go into anti-submarine warfare that we also participate in.

AM: So in short, you’d agree with Sir Nicholas in being worried about a future Prime Minister who was not prepared to press the nuclear button?

SP: No, I did not say that. Command and control of our nuclear deterrent remains at the highest level. Every day of every year our submarines remain on patrol. And that deterrent is needed more than ever in this turbulent and uncertain world.

(ends)