ANDREW MARR:  
Now, as we’ve been hearing this morning, the West’s long war in Afghanistan is very nearly at an end. Four hundred and fifty-three British soldiers have lost their lives, thousands more have been maimed or wounded, and the net gain is at least open to question. Meanwhile, general after general is saying that army cuts have been too deep and leave Britain exposed. Well the new Defence Secretary, Michael Fallon, is here. Good morning to you, Mr. Fallon.

MICHAEL FALLON:  
Good morning.

ANDREW MARR:  
First of all, can we talk about today? The flag has come down at Camp Bastion. What is the significance of that and what happens over the next few days?

MICHAEL FALLON:  
Yes, let me confirm that at 6 o’clock this morning the flag came down at Camp Bastion. The responsibility for Helmand province has now been handed over to the Afghan National Army and this is now effectively the end of military operations,
combat operations …

ANDREW MARR:
*(over)* So we’re out?

MICHAEL FALLON:
… in Afghanistan, and by Christmas the vast bulk of our troops will be back home.

ANDREW MARR:
And who will be left back there after Christmas? Will there be any British forces in Afghanistan after that?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Yes we’ll have a few hundred still there helping to train at the officer academy. I took the first passing out parade there last month. That is helping to strengthen the Afghan Army and we’ll have others supporting in the ministries and other people working on development. But that will be in the low hundreds, not the thousands that we have had committed there.

ANDREW MARR:
Now when all of this started - I was talking to Jonathan Powell right at the beginning of this – this war was as it were sold to the British people as sorting out Afghanistan, turning it into an effective democracy which was no threat to us. We’re not there really yet, are we? We have left before that’s been done.

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well 8 million people voted in Afghanistan this summer. That’s an enormous tribute to the progress that’s been made in Afghanistan and indeed the progress being made by the Afghan Security Forces. One of the big differences between Afghanistan and Iraq is there is now a 330,000 strong Afghan security force, army and police, and they enabled those first democratic elections this summer, and Afghanistan now has a democratically elected president, a government of national unity and has every chance now of a more secure future.
ANDREW MARR:
So you think the Taliban, for instance, won’t come back into Helmand province?

MICHAEL FALLON:
The Taliban is still there. There is still insurgency, but for the last couple of years operations against the Taliban in North Helmand have been led by the Afghan Army. They’ve been doing the hard fighting, they’ve been taking the casualties, and they are now taking full responsibility. So we’re not saying this morning that the Taliban have been defeated. Far from it; there is still insurgency there. But what we are saying is we are leaving a legacy of a more prosperous Afghanistan, one with a democratic government and with its own security force that has a much better chance now of providing safety and prosperity for its people.

ANDREW MARR:
So I know you were not there through most of this war; you’ve just come in right at the end as it were. Nonetheless, we’ve had generals saying again and again that we didn’t have enough troops there at the crucial point; that we put our troops into a very difficult situation - promising one thing, not being able to deliver it - and we made big mistakes. The British political class, as I said right at the beginning, have never talked about any kind of mistakes at all, never apologised for anything. As a representative, if I may, of the British political class, you should, shouldn’t you?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well I think the generals have been clear that mistakes were made and mistakes were made militarily, mistakes were made by the politicians at the time - and this goes back 10, 13 years, some time now. And clearly the numbers weren’t there at the beginning, the equipment wasn’t quite good enough at the beginning, and we’ve learnt an awful lot from the campaign. But don’t let’s ignore what has been achieved. We have now some 6 million people in school in Afghanistan – 3 million of them girls. There is access in Helmand – I visited a couple of months ago – there is access to healthcare and to education in that province that simply didn’t exist 10 years ago.

ANDREW MARR:
What about the proposition, however, that these wars have made life on the streets of
Britain safer? A lot of people would look around and say actually they feel less safe than 11 years ago. What we’ve done is we’ve pushed the insurgency into Iraq where it’s absolutely out of control. We’ve had Afghan leaders now saying that they would quite like the caliphate, so-called – ISIS – to come into Afghanistan. We have simply pushed the situation around the Middle East rather than dealing with it, haven’t we?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well that’s not what President Ghani said to me when I saw him just before the inauguration. No, we’ve denied the use of Afghanistan to al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda were responsible for the attacks in 9/11. The problem of Islamic extremism was there before we went into Afghanistan and is going to be with us for a long time, but I think what’s important is to learn the lessons from Afghanistan that if you’re going to roll back extremism, you need to do so in these countries with a homegrown army, with well-supported local forces that have the backing of the local population, and you need to do so not just as a military operation but you need to do everything else as well. You need the political support for the government, the diplomacy, the development aid alongside it.

ANDREW MARR:
So if we apply that lesson for instance to Syria, surely the answer is that we must do a great deal more than we’re doing at the moment to as it were create support and shape a Free Syrian Army that can fight in Syria?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Yes, I mean we’re dealing with ISIL, the Islamic state that knows no borders, so they don’t regard the borderline between Iraq and Syria as having any …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Existing.

MICHAEL FALLON:
… as existing, with any jurisdiction. And we’ve been very clear and the prime minister has been clear to parliament that ISIL can only be defeated in both Syria and in Iraq. And you’re right, the solution in Syria is the same as it is in Iraq. We have to
find the moderate opposition to the regime and to ISIL and to help train up an army, improve their collective self, their community self-defence, help train up an army that can tackle terrorism in their own country.

ANDREW MARR:
And are we doing enough to do that at the moment, do you think?

MICHAEL FALLON:
We are now scoping with the Americans and the other coalition allies how we can improve training of the moderate Syrians outside Syria – because, as you know, there’s a war going on there at the moment – and we’re looking at other ways in which we can help. But we certainly need to operate in Syria as we have been in Iraq.

ANDREW MARR:
You’ve cut the army back too far, haven’t you?

MICHAEL FALLON:
No, I don’t accept that. We had the defence review.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) That’s what the generals say.

MICHAEL FALLON:
We had to get the defence budget under control. I think we’ve shown now that we can manage the defence budget far better than the one we inherited. That’s why this year we were able to announce investment in armoured vehicles – 3.4 billion on the new Scout vehicles – taking the second carrier into the Navy, new tanker aircraft and helicopters. So we are investing again.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) But in the end we need soldiers for all of these things. We need soldiers. We have cut the number of soldiers quite markedly and, according to the Sunday Times today, there’s going to be further defence cuts in the next government.
MICHAEL FALLON:
Well that story is wrong; they’re not right about that. We have spending now fixed this year and till the end of 15/16. Then, as you know, there’s going to be a spending review.

ANDREW MARR:
(over) So under the Tories no more cuts to the army?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well there’s going to be a spending review in a couple of years’ time. But, look, the threats to this country have not gone away. We’ve seen that very markedly this year when the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines and the engineers and the medics are now (several hundred of them) going down to Sierra Leone to help protect us against the spread of Ebola, when you have the Royal Air Force doing strikes in Iraq, and when you have the army now on the biggest exercise for 8 years in Poland to deter President Putin. So these threats to our country have not gone away.

ANDREW MARR:
So we’re using the army all around the world …

MICHAEL FALLON:
We are.

ANDREW MARR:
… and yet it’s a much, much smaller army. General Richards has said recently that further cuts to the army would “make a mockery” in his words of our fight against ISIS, so can you as the new defence secretary tell me that the MoD budget will be protected in future spending rounds?

MICHAEL FALLON:
We’re not planning cuts to the army. On the contrary. I think what we’ve learnt from Af…
ANDREW MARR:

(over) With respect, “we’re not planning” is the traditional weasel word for yeah and then it happens.

MICHAEL FALLON:

Look defence spending has been fixed for this year and to the end of 15/16. No other departments have their spending fixed. But I think the lesson from Afghanistan is that it isn’t simply numbers of troops that matter; it’s how agile they are, how deployable they are, whether they have the right equipment. What we’re doing in Iraq, for example, with the RAF doesn’t involve huge numbers of people. It involves having the right number of Tornados flying these missions as they’re flying them today.

ANDREW MARR:

Can I return briefly to Afghanistan?

MICHAEL FALLON:

Yes.

ANDREW MARR:

There’ll be no more fighting forces there from now on. What happens over the next few days?

MICHAEL FALLON:

Well what happens over the next few days is the final troops will leave, having handed over Helmand province to the Afghan Army. They will leave and depart for Kandahar. In turn, Kandahar base will be handed over too and we will end up with a very small number, just a few hundred, left in Kabul and the Kabul area itself continuing to train at the Afghan officer academy, which is important, and continuing to offer help and liaison in the Afghan ministries. And of course there’s a big development aid going on as well, so we’re still spending quite a lot of money, we’re committed (as the rest of NATO is) to that mission for next year and the following year.
ANDREW MARR:
So let’s look at one bleak but possible event, which is another insurrection, another series of big attacks in Helmand or around Kabul. Can you say that the British will not … we British will not be involved there again fighting come what may, we’re not going back in again come what may?

MICHAEL FALLON:
We’re not going to send combat troops back into Afghanistan. We’ve made that very, very …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) Under any circumstances?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Under any circumstances. Combat troops will not be going in there. Of course we’ll continue … Nobody’s walking away from Afghanistan. NATO’s made it clear that we will continue our support mission there and much of that now will be training and liaison and helping with intelligence and surveillance and counter-terrorism where necessary. But the answer is very straight: no, we’re not going to be recommittting combat troops to Afghanistan.

ANDREW MARR:
The prime minister’s used the phrase “mission accomplished” and yet a lot of people will say the Taliban are still active, they have not been defeated.

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well the mission that’s been accomplished is we have denied Afghanistan as a safe haven for terrorism and terrorist atrocities that could take place in Britain and Western Europe. So to that extent, Afghan…the mission has been accomplished in Afghanistan. But there is no guarantee that Afghan is going to be stable and safe. What we’re saying to you is that we have given Afghanistan the best possible chance of a safer future - primarily through the sacrifice of our own troops and other NATO troops in building up the Afghan Army itself, which as from this morning will take on now the primary responsibility for the security of Helmand province and those other
areas of Afghanistan where there has been insurgency.

ANDREW MARR:
Coming to events nearer to home, you’re a well-known Eurosceptic in the Conservative family. What’s your understanding of the effect of what Angela Merkel and other European leaders have been doing to your leader David Cameron over the issue of both budget and migration over the last few days?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well there are other countries that are going to help us reform the European Union and I’m sure there are things that Germany wants reformed, as other countries do.

ANDREW MARR:
So you don’t believe her when she says we’re going to stop you stopping the free movement of people?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well what the prime minister is going to be arguing for is the free movement of people to claim benefits. Coming here to work …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) I know, but everyone agrees with that.

MICHAEL FALLON:
(over) Well they don’t …

ANDREW MARR:
(over) I mean other European leaders do.

MICHAEL FALLON:
(over) Well the treaty doesn’t do that yet and we do need, therefore, changes – this is part of the reform package that the prime minister wants – that the original freedom of move…
ANDREW MARR:
(over) Sorry, but the suggestion has been to go further – to have quotas and so forth.

MICHAEL FALLON:
(over) The orig… But the original freedom of movement didn’t encompass a world where people would move from one member state to the other simply to get hold of a better welfare system. Now that’s the kind of reform we need. I think everybody would agree with that and that’s what the prime minister’s going to be negotiating for.

ANDREW MARR:
Now you as a party have made Rochester and Strood the battle line. You’ve poured people in, you’ve poured money in, you’ve got a very good organisation there. What happens to the party and its leadership if you then fail there?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well we’re not planning to fail there …

ANDREW MARR
(over) I know you’re not planning to fail, but you might. The polls suggest UKIP are head.

MICHAEL FALLON:
I was there yesterday and we found plenty of support and people voting Conservative. They understand that UKIP can’t actually deliver with one MP or two MPs. They’re not … they’re not a party that can deliver a government. They can’t, above all, deliver a referendum. There is only one party in British politics that can give people finally a say they haven’t had for over 40 years and that’s the Conservative Party.

ANDREW MARR:
And you’ll be coming to give people a say over a negotiation at the moment you don’t look you’re winning. That’s the problem.

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well the negotiation itself hasn’t started yet. We’ve set out the outlines …
ANDREW MARR:
Of course.

MICHAEL FALLON:
… giving national parliaments more say over European legislation. Who would disagree with that? Stopping people moving around Europe to claim benefits – that’s extremely important; having an open trading Europe that has less bureaucracy, makes it easier to create jobs and wealth that we’ve done in this country that will help the other countries in Europe – that’s sensible too.

ANDREW MARR:
There’s very little evidence, however, that the other major European players want the kind of Europe that you want.

MICHAEL FALLON:
I don’t agree with that. There are other countries that aren’t going to join the euro. They’re entitled to the protection of the single market. There is a lot of understanding across Europe now that Europe has stopped growing, that it’s fossilised; that other parts of the world are growing faster, creating more jobs, have a much more liberal, market orientated approach. Europe has to change. Some of these treaties are 40, 50 years old now and they do need to be modernised.

ANDREW MARR:
Aren’t you worried about UKIP at all? There’s a huge amount of extra money being pouring into them. They now say they’re going to fight 100 seats seriously, not 20 as we were told before. The fox is in the hen house, is it not?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well they fought several hundred seats last time. They’re perfectly entitled to do that. But in the end, I think we’ve got to deal with the central argument: that if you want change in Europe, if you want a referendum on Europe, if you’re against Europe and you want to leave Europe, the only party that will give you that vote, the first time since 1975, is the Conservative Party.
ANDREW MARR:
And you can win that argument and stop them in Rochester?

MICHAEL FALLON:
Well that’s what we’re aiming to do. We can do that, yes.

ANDREW MARR:
Alright. For now, Michael Fallon, thank you very much indeed for joining us.

INTERVIEW ENDS