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On Britain's Security-Defence Needs...

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The Prime Minister, onboard HMS Albion, one of two of the Royal Navy's newest assault vessels, recently put forward his thoughts on defence policy in a thorough, assertive, and forthright fashion. Amid much media discussion, such as fears over navy cuts, poor housing and deteriorating morale, he highlighted the fact that Britain's defence spending was far higher as a proportion of gross national income than most other developed countries. As it stands, Britain currently spends about two and a half percent on defence annually; incidentally, at approximately £34 billion (€51 billion; \$66 billion), this equates to the second highest security-defence budget in the world. Although defence spending declined massively after the Cold War, it has been elevated in recent years. With current levels, Britain sustains small, but potent, nuclear forces, based on the Trident nuclear missile and 'Vanguard' class submarines. The Royal Navy remains the world's second strongest, equipped with aircraft carriers, missile firing submarines, destroyers, frigates, and assault vessels – as well as a plethora of auxiliary and other support ships. The Royal Air Force has more advanced aircraft than any other bar the United States Air Force and France's *Armée de l'Air*. And the British Army – although small by international comparisons, as has always been the case – is by far the most professional, best trained, and respected, in the world. We should all be proud of our armed forces.

During his speech, Tony Blair told his audience of officers and personnel that the government was planning to increase the nation's strategic capabilities. Highlighting the planned acquisition of a new generation of destroyers and aircraft carriers, the Prime Minister emphasised his government's support of the navy. The new shipbuilding programme, costing approximately £14 billion, is not cheap. Although the replacement level of destroyers and aircraft carriers is expected to be smaller than the numbers currently available (six new destroyers instead of the current eight; two new carriers rather than the current three), the future ships' capabilities are expected to be vastly superior. For example, the Royal Navy recently suggested that one new 'Type 45' class destroyer would have more firepower than all of the fleet's current destroyers combined. And the new aircraft carriers will be almost three times the size of one of the existing 'Invincible' class vessels. Further, the new 'Astute' class submarines will likely be the most advanced in the world, and plans were recently put forward to re-equip the fleet with a new generation of escort vessels, such as frigates or corvettes. Given that naval reach is essential to a maritime country like the United Kingdom, these new capabilities – so long as they are brought into service, which they must – will not only maintain, but also strengthen Britain's reach in the world. As such, they will provide London with additional tools with which to conduct the nation's foreign policy, facilitating the promotion of its interests and values.

Other than highlighting the government's commitment to Britain's Armed Forces, the Prime Minister was also bold in his assertions on the future of the country's foreign and security policy. First, he claimed that Britain – unlike most other developed countries – was unique in its ability to use armed force to fight wars at a high intensity, whereas most other countries have slashed their defence spending so dramatically that their military capabilities provide them with only the means to take part in multilateral peace keeping operations. Britain is the only country in the world that can currently fight in conflicts at the same intensity as the United States; a position the nation must hang on to. Societies unable to defend themselves, or use their armed forces actively to uphold their interests and values, will undoubtedly suffer in the longer term. Second, and connectedly, the Prime Minister highlighted the need to synthesise both 'hard' and 'soft' power in foreign policy. These are two terms that often arouse much confusion. Developed by Joseph Nye in the last decade, 'hard power' refers to any *coercive* means in foreign policy, those that might otherwise be called 'sticks'. 'Sticks' can include anything from threats, economic sanctions and embargos, to the application of armed force. 'Soft power', on the other hand, refers only to persuasion, or better, a nation's ability to attract others to its cause. Traditionally called 'carrots', Britain certainly has an abundance of 'soft power': constitutional government, human rights and culture. But as Tony Blair correctly identified, it remains essential that both 'carrots' and 'sticks' be used in tandem, as both complement one another. After all, behind every constitution in every democracy remains a policeman, with his truncheon ready to uphold the law. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Tony Blair told us that the concept of defence had changed in a radically different strategic environment. During the Cold War, defence meant the protection of one's homeland, and this required a primarily defensive posture. In today's connected world, however, it is necessary to neutralise threats in distant lands, in order to protect our homeland. As the *European Security Strategy* says: 'With the new threats, the first line of defence will often be abroad.' That is to say, the only defence is a good offence.

And yet, in light of these declarations, problems remain, of which many are acute. The media, a considerable chunk of the political leadership, and society in general, has failed to understand the changed nature of security – both threat and provision. Related to this is the issue of sufficient funding for Britain's Armed Forces. While the government's commitments are welcomed, it is still evidently clear that the military is under-equipped. Poor pay contributes to an unhappy soldier, sailor or airman, and the nation must adequately fund those who may be asked at some point to give up their lives to defend us. That a regular soldier gets paid little more than the national minimum wage is unacceptable. In part, this rests on successive governments' insufficient commitment to make the case for the military, but the blame is also held by society at large, academia and other interested parties. Defence intellectuals, former officers, and the defence-industrial base have not made the case for the upholding of strong armed forces; this is compounded by the fact that fewer and fewer people gain any experience of military life. This must all change – but how?

To begin with, we must continue to increase defence spending in the long term. Even when Britain is involved in numerous military operations overseas, the proportion of national resources allocated to our Armed Forces is the smallest it has been since the 1930s. While the government has increased spending quite dramatically in many areas, the military has received a relatively smaller share – it must get more. Equally, it is all very well to decrease the number of vessels after each new generation comes into service, justifying this through statements of improved capability, but there has to be an ultimate limit, or else Britain will end up with just a coastal protection flotilla. Although this may please a few Labour pacifists and isolationist Tories, any government must retain sufficient forces should the nation be required to fight a major war; weakness can cause miscalculation on the part of our adversaries, and inadvertently lead to war. Second, the government must do more to make the case for a strong defence, and persuade the nation of the benefits. As we suggested in our manifesto, *The British Moment*, a National Security Strategy is needed more now than ever before. If this is synchronised with the *European Security Strategy*, it can help to direct national attention towards our Armed Forces, and provide strategic direction. Third, more awareness must be made of the military, and the navy in particular. Britain's esteemed military history should be taught in schools, providing the nation's children with knowledge on the Armed Forces and their purpose, contributing, in turn, to the construction of a shared history – something raised continuously in recent months. Finally, given the impact of defence inflation, and our weaker partners in the European Union, Britain must do more to foster greater European military capabilities, and in some cases, dramatic increases in expenditure. Countries like Italy, Spain and Germany have for too long relied on the United States, and to a lesser extent Britain, to protect them, and to provide global security. With ever more challenges on the horizon, from the Middle East to China and Russia, American power could easily become overstretched and undermined; Europeans will also suffer the consequences.

In what may be his final speech on defence, the Prime Minister certainly gave us much to think about. It is necessary that we heed his words. Britain is a global power with many obligations to uphold and duties to discharge in the wider world. Isolationism during intense globalisation is not an option, and nor is passivity or indifference. Events in far off lands can easily harm British interests, damage our security, and undercut our values. Strong and well-resourced Armed Forces, as well as London's willingness to use them, are essential if the nation and its allies are to continue to prosper.