

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: UK Defence and the Indo-Pacific, HC 183

Tuesday 7 June 2022

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Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Stuart Anderson; Sarah Atherton; Dave Doogan; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar.

Questions 1-43

Witnesses

[I](#): Meia Nouwens, Senior Fellow for Chinese Defence Policy and Military Modernisation, IISS.

[II](#): Professor Alessio Patalano, Department of War Studies, King's College London, and Professor Steve Tsang, Director, SOAS China Institute.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Meia Nouwens, Professor Patalano and Professor Tsang.

Chair: Welcome to the Defence Committee. We are looking at the Indo-Pacific, and the purpose of this session is to gather an insight into China's role and ambitions in the area, ahead of the Committee's visit to Australia and later to India and Malaysia. I am very grateful to Meia Nouwens for joining us for the first session. She is the Senior Fellow for Chinese defence policy and military modernisation at the IISS. Thank you for your time this afternoon, Meia, and I look forward to hearing what you have to say.

Q1 **John Spellar:** Clearly, a lot has happened since the Government's integrated review. Is the Indo-Pacific region still important to the UK, compared with the Euro-Atlantic, with the events that have been taking place? If so, what should the UK's objectives in the region be?

Meia Nouwens: Thank you for having me. It is a very important question. There is undoubtedly still a need for the UK to look to the Indo-Pacific—it is the centre of economic growth—and the UK has vested interests, in terms of both prosperity and security in the region. What we have seen in the last few years is that the Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions are connected when it comes to prosperity, but also in terms of security. For example, consider the impact of what is happening in Ukraine on the Indo-Pacific region, in particular what the PLA might learn from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and so on.

There is absolutely a need for the UK to continue looking east, if not in the immediate term, because security priorities might lie in the Euro-Atlantic for the moment, but in the longer term with the need to be present, active and engaged in the region. That is not just for the UK, but to support and uphold the rules-based international order in a region where it has been heavily contested in the last few years. There is a role for the UK to play in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as areas in which the UK can learn from its partners and allies in the region.

Q2 **Chair:** Are we playing a double act here, trying to be friends with China but also holding it to account?

Meia Nouwens: I think that is absolutely what the relationship with China should look like. There should be room for co-operation in areas where that is possible. There is a prosperity agenda that needs to be fulfilled in the UK, and China is important as an economic market for the UK, as it is for other countries, just like the United States and the European Union. But there are of course areas in which competition and contestation are visible, and where the UK is in disagreement with China in areas of international law. Those are areas that should be discussed openly and frankly. I do not think that one should supersede the other.

Q3 **Dave Doogan:** With specific regard to the amount that China spends on



defence and the size and scale of its defence equipment ambitions, how concerned should the rest of the world be by the scale of that operation, both financially and in terms of the results of that financial investment in hardware and personnel? Where is it going? Is it messaging, or is it the economy—we all know how important a vibrant defence manufacturing economy is if you have a developed economy? What is the key driver?

Meia Nouwens: How big is the Chinese defence budget? In 2022, we saw an increase in China's defence spending for the first time since covid-19 emerged, and we estimate that it is now \$290 billion. It is still the second-largest in the world, comparatively speaking. The United States still far outranks China. Of course, the difference is the question of how far that budget in China stretches in terms of what the PLA can acquire, dollar for dollar, or yuan for yuan, compared with what other countries are able to acquire in their currency; and second of all, of course, whether or not everything is reported. We know, looking at China's defence budget, that not everything is entirely transparent, and so we know that gaps in spending exist in terms of how they are reported. We can therefore imagine that that spending is actually a lot larger than the budget that is recorded every year. The IISS estimate is to add 33% to the officially declared central Government budget for defence every year to account for that extra spending—security-related spending, acquisitions, defence investment, and so on and so forth.

In terms of how worried we should be, obviously, if you are a smaller neighbour country in the region compared with the PLA, you will not be able to spend as much and there is a limit on what you can acquire, so you have to be a lot smarter in how you spend your defence budget. We see countries in the region, particularly in south-east Asia, grapple with that a little bit. To put this into context, as one of my colleagues, Fenella McGerty, calculated, look at just the rate of increase every year. Take, for example, 2020 to 2021, when the budget increase was roughly £13 billion US dollars; that equates to Taiwan's entire military budget. If you are a country in the region, that is very concerning indeed.

What is driving this defence spending? I think threat perceptions are definitely driving this increase in defence spending in real terms. We know that there is competition for resources within central budget allocations each year. In the past, we have seen spending drop in areas such as education, science, technology or even foreign affairs. We see an effort to really prioritise defence spending within central budgets. Within the defence technological and industrial base in China, there is ongoing progress, whereby they no longer really rely on foreign technologies and they can innovate and depend on the domestic, indigenous defence industrial capacity to a greater extent than they have in the past three decades. On the other hand, there are still unanswered questions, and there are still some ongoing inefficiencies that we need to keep in mind. Yes, they are strong, and, yes, they are powerful in terms of what they are able to spend and build, but there are incapacities that also need to be considered.

Q4 **Dave Doogan:** You raise a very interesting point there that many of us



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have given some time and thought to, which is the trajectory of indigenous technological development. Without being disrespectful, the Chinese have spent a lot of the previous number of decades catching up with western levels of quality and performance in a lot of things, including defence equipment. If these two lines are both going up, is it right to say that at some stage, the Chinese line will cross over the western line, and they will no longer be trying to imitate and improve on western technology; they will be busy developing their own technology that will give the west something to think about?

Meia Nouwens: I think that is an ambition that they have—the ambition to not be dependent on foreign technology. As we look at the implications of, for example, the technological competition that we have seen between the United States and China developing, I think that ambition to be less dependent on foreign technology and innovation will continue. For the moment, and for the next five years, I would say there is still a dual-track approach. Domestic innovation is being funded and supported by the Government, and on the other hand there is still this trajectory of, “If we can get it abroad more easily than developing it ourselves, so be it.” I think this parallel track will continue, and it is something that countries like the UK need to think about, because that technological transfer is still a risk.

Dave Doogan: Thank you.

Q5 **Richard Drax:** Meia, it is nice to see you, and thank you for coming. My question is about China’s military modernisation and how it has progressed. You will be getting a question straight after this on its ability, so could you concentrate on the modernisation and how far it has progressed in the army, navy and air force?

On the army, could you touch on its ability to launch a large invasion of, say, Taiwan? How able is it to transport tens of thousands of men, if not more, across the sea?

On the navy, we think there is a third aircraft carrier being built, and a fourth, possibly nuclear, is under way, with more planned. Is that true? What does that tell us?

On the air force, their aircraft are now as capable as ours, as I understand it. How are they progressing there? Could you answer as briefly as you could, Meia, if that is possible?

Meia Nouwens: Just highlights, then. On military modernisation, in terms of heavy metal—the kit and the technology—I think the PLA are more confident than they ever have been. The problem with modernisation is everything around that: everything that has to do with force structure, command-and-control structures, the concept of jointness and integrated joint operations, and how to turn that from theory into practice. That is still very much a work in progress, and we have seen some stumbling blocks there in the last few years. There has not at all been as much progress as would have been wanted by this point.



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Similarly, a key cornerstone—one of the main goals of military modernisation—is the concept of informatisation, so network-centric concepts within the PLA and the ability to dominate the information space. There, we have heard from the PLA itself and from President Xi Jinping himself that progress is far behind schedule and not at all what was anticipated. There are indeed some areas where modernisation has progressed, and areas where—this is perhaps not as obvious for us from looking at the media, so it requires some more contextual analysis—there has been not failures but a lack of progress.

There has been an effort within the army to move away from regional security to becoming a force that can quickly and rapidly mobilise and perform trans-theatre and cross-theatre operations. I think that has been successful. We have seen some of that already, in terms of responses to border issues with India in the last few years.

On Taiwan, it is interesting that what we are seeing at the moment is not necessarily the amassing of forces from the PLA army, but instead a focus on military-civil fusion, in the sense that we see a lot of effort being placed on logistics, the use of civilian networks and transport methods for logistics, such as ro-ro ships—the use of ferry ships. All that is ongoing.

On the navy, you are correct, Sir. I cannot speak to whether more is planned. There is still a question of whether it is four, six or more, but certainly the third aircraft carrier seems to be close to completion, and the fourth, as you say, could conceivably be nuclear. I think the intention there, however, is almost a mirroring of the capabilities that a great power should have and that will be used. We have seen in the last few months the use of the Liaoning aircraft carrier, which is the first aircraft carrier that China built—it was procured from Ukraine. That has been used quite heavily for exercises. The ability to man, equip and exercise all three aircraft carriers with the high-skill talent that the PLA still requires will be a challenge in the next few years.

We have seen in the air force some capability that can even outmatch our capabilities, particularly in the air-to-air missile domain. However, in terms of the air force's ability to date, if we look at the force capabilities that have been procured, I would say that it is still very much an air force of multiple generations. There is also the question of the air force's ability to project power at greater distance. When we look at logistics and capabilities that allow the PLA to do so at longer range that is progressing very slowly, and not as fast as we might imagine.

Q6 Richard Drax: Meia, finally, are they looking at autonomous aircraft as we are—is that on their agenda?

Meia Nouwens: Are they looking at autonomous aircraft?

Richard Drax: Do they have any? Are they looking at it? Is that somewhere they are going to head, like we are?

Meia Nouwens: At the moment, I have not necessarily seen anything that talks about autonomous aircraft other than a strong focus on UAVs



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within the PLA, which has an interesting way of looking at autonomous capabilities and platforms. While there is an interesting question of how it might leverage that in a conflict scenario, there is a still firm view within the PLA about the use of humans in the loop and maintaining that control. I am not sure how realistic that is in the near term.

Richard Drax: Thank you.

Q7 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Hi Meia, it is nice to see you again. I think that we met briefly a while ago.

On the back of Richard's comments, Xi Jinping has said that the PLA is training to fight and win, and is ready to do so by 2049. Do you think that it will be by 2049 or sooner? That is quite a specific statement, so where do you think it wants to fight and win?

Meia Nouwens: 2049 is specific, because it relates to the appointed time at which one of the centenary goals from the founding of the party and the country, and by which point China needs to achieve great power or large power status. That is why 2049 is stated. There are other goals that point to it being able to fight and win before that, particularly 2035, by which time the PLA needs to be a fully modernised military. What it means by that is not just capability driven, but geographically and priority driven. In that case, we are talking about a PLA that is capable of projecting power and becoming the dominant military power in the Indo-Pacific—Asia-Pacific, as it calls that region—displacing United States as the predominant military power in the region. By that point the PLA needs to be able to fight and win wars, rather than 2049.

Undoubtedly, the priority will be around regional questions that might hinder that power projection capability by the PLA and questions that tie to the CCP's legitimacy. Inherently, that is Taiwan or other territorial disputes. On the most likely flashpoints, Taiwan is one of the most likely that sticks in the mind. Will it be able to fight that? That is still a question, and it depends on what that fight looks like. If it just a conflict between Taiwan and the PLA, the Taiwanese Defence Minister has said in the past few months that they are already capable of doing it, but the PLA is preparing for a bigger scenario—and a worst-case scenario—which is a conflict over Taiwan with the United States. We have seen statements in PLA literature that question whether the PLA is capable of winning a war against the United States, over Taiwan or otherwise.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Thanks.

Q8 **Sarah Atherton:** Hello Meia, it is good to see you again. What do you think the impact has been on the carrier strike deployment last year?

Meia Nouwens: For China or for the region?

Sarah Atherton: China.

Meia Nouwens: For China, there is a question of what the UK's intention with the carrier strike group deployment was. Overall, from what I understand, the PLA kept its distance and responded professionally. The

tensions were not as high as we have perhaps seen in the past with other ships operating in the region.

The perspective of the PLA and the party on this is that it is not something that is permanent or persistent. That is echoed in the viewpoints of other countries in the region, and I know that we will discuss this more in other segments of this session. From the PLA's perspective, it is, of course, a worrying signal that there is potentially a greater realisation of effort, and more interest from European powers such as the UK in becoming more militarily engaged in what China considers to be its own backyard. I think that will be the most concerning development following the carrier strike group—not just that it was the carrier strike group, led by the UK, but that the Netherlands and the United States collaborated on that jointly. That, for China, is not a positive development, in terms of its own security plans for the region.

- Q9 Sarah Atherton:** The integrated review spoke about a persistent presence in that region. If this deployment was to be annual, how do you think that would change opinion?

Meia Nouwens: I think it would make the UK commitment more believable. It would strengthen that commitment, and the statement of intent to engage more deeply than any other European power in the region.

Sarah Atherton: Thanks, Meia.

- Q10 Chair:** Can I ask about the ranking, if you like, of the three services? Is it right to say that the army is the senior service and that the other two are subservient, or are even part of the army? Is that how they operate?

Meia Nouwens: Are the air force and navy part of the army? The army has historically been the dominant force in the PLA, and that, of course, is one of the main hindrances to modernisation, professionalisation and achieving the ability to operate jointly. We have seen an effort to raise the priority of the air force and the navy, along with the PLA Rocket Force turning into a service, and, of course, the Strategic Support Force looking at space and network-centric capabilities. Those have gained more attention and priority, in terms of procurement and focus, in the modernisation reforms in the past few years. In some ways, the army has actually been the biggest loser in PLA modernisation.

As I said, joint effort of all those services to work seamlessly together hasn't been going very well, in the sense that, at the moment, all of the PLA's five theatre commanders are from the PLA ground forces—as opposed to the eastern theatre command, with a navy theatre commander, or the southern theatre command, with one from the PLA air force. That points to the entrenched power of the PLA ground forces structurally within the PLA, and the failure to sufficiently incentivise this concept and the prioritisation of jointness in the PLA moving forward.

- Q11 Chair:** Following up on Richard's question on the connection with Russia—the symbiotic relationship with Russia, with Russia providing military



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hardware—are we seeing the PLA pivot away from that? Is it no longer so reliant on it, or are there still requirements for certain weapon systems?

Meia Nouwens: No, I think we have seen the PLA move away from dependence on Russian arms imports over the past few years. Considering the difficult relationship between Russia and many other countries in the world at the moment—as well as the difficulty for China in trying to balance support for Russia with not going against its proposed principles of self-determination, territorial integrity and so on—I think we will see an even greater resistance or hesitance to rely on Russia moving forward. There is, of course, also a question as to whether procurement from Russia is actually possible in the near future, depending on how Russia's economy develops.

There are certain capabilities and components that China would still like to receive from Russia that have been blocked in the past five to 10 years, that Russia has been unwilling to export to China, which is everything from its most advanced fighter aircraft and certain engine capabilities and technologies to its most advanced air defence systems. Those could potentially be areas that China would be interested in procuring if it came at a cost that would actually be possible, but that is a big if, and it is not necessarily something that China requires to be able to complete military modernisation.

Q12 **Chair:** That could be a knock-on consequence of a closer relationship developing because of the Ukraine war.

Meia Nouwens: It could. It could actually make Russia willing to overturn its hesitance to export those capabilities, but that would be the last thing that Russia could hold on to in this relationship between Russia and China that would still allow it some sort of equal partnership, even though we know that that partnership is not equal.

Chair: Absolutely. Stuart?

Q13 **Stuart Anderson:** Meia, thank you for the comments so far. I wanted to expand on Richard's comments about modernisation. You have given an update in that area. You can have all the latest equipment going, but it does not necessarily increase your capability if the troops or the forces cannot operate that equipment. Is the capability increasing at the pace of modernisation, and where would you put them at the moment?

Meia Nouwens: You are right to say that equipment does not equate to capability, and that realisation that it is actually the softer angles of modernisation that are lacking—this heartware question, as I said before, rather than the hardware question—is something that we see reflected in PLA literature at the moment. While equipment has been on a very steep upwards trajectory modernisation-wise, capability has not necessarily followed suit. The problem there, of course, is how one builds capability when one has not fought a conflict since 1979—and that was only a border skirmish with Vietnam, and the PLA was not very successful in that at the end of the day, either.



There is a concern that capability is being developed, but at the end of the day, what is the capability requirement for the type of war that China seeks to fight over, for example, a contingency like Taiwan? That will be fast-paced modern warfare, high precision and network-centric; it will be fought in ways that the PLA has never fought, so there are capability-related questions, and questions around combat readiness that the PLA does not, I think, reflect on favourably when it looks at itself.

- Q14 **Stuart Anderson:** The first two comparisons I would like to consider are the comparison with other countries in the region, and then the comparison between China's capability and that of countries in the west.

Meia Nouwens: Could you be a little bit more specific?

Stuart Anderson: How would China compare militarily to other countries in the region, and how would it compare to the west today, not from 2035 onwards? Where is it today, specifically with its capability—not just the equipment side of things?

Meia Nouwens: I do not actually think that the PLA is as capable as, for example, western navies or armies that have experience in warfighting under network-centric conditions in a co-ordinated way. That is one of the main questions when we think about this comparison today; western militaries operating within an alliance system have an integrated aspect to their capability that China does not have. That is unfavourable to China's ability to leverage its military today in the region.

Of course, the advantage that China has in terms of its capability in the region is the regional proximity of the conflicts in which it is likely to fight, and also the element of timing. If we are thinking about a Taiwan scenario, for example, it is undoubted that the PLA is more capable than the Taiwanese military would be, simply by sheer size and volume. On the other hand, as I said before, this is bigger than just a cross-straits scenario. The PLA might have the advantage of time and geographic proximity, which would allow it to be more capable than it would be, for example, abroad, further out of the region. Nevertheless, it would be facing, potentially in a worst-case scenario for the PLA, an integrated set of adversaries—

- Q15 **Stuart Anderson:** I think it would be fair to say that we have overestimated the Russian capability in previous years. I have just got back with some colleagues from the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Lithuania. One of the concerns in some of the sub-committees was that we have overestimated Russia, which will have a knock-on effect, and we will end up underestimating China. How would we counter that? What could we do to prevent that?

Meia Nouwens: This goes back to everything I said about not focusing only on the kit, and not assuming that the PLA's ability to leverage that and operate it successfully in a contingency is lower than it is. Looking clearly at PLA concepts, doctrines and strategies, and at how they are being exercised and practised and how the PLA is being trained in the region and domestically, is an inherent part of this, as is looking at



incentivisation structures in terms of the PLA command. What does that structure look like? How is that developing? That is going to be a big stumbling block for the PLA—trust in its own forces, trust that its command structures work, and allowing the PLA to be as flexible as it needs to be for the type of warfighting that it wants to do.

- Q16 **Sarah Atherton:** Meia, please correct me if I am wrong: China was last in a conventional war with Vietnam in '79, but aside from that, it has exercised continual assertive tactics with its militarisation of the South China sea, the belt and road initiative, the naval base in Djibouti and so on. You have already spoken, in response to Stuart, about how ready China is for conflict. How prepared is it for conflict? It may not be as ready as we think, but how prepared is it for conflict?

Meia Nouwens: That depends on the conflict we are talking about. If it is a conflict that is not inherently in its interests and that does not take place within its near abroad, then I don't think it is prepared for that—it's not prepared to sacrifice. But if it is a conflict over Taiwan, one of its core interests, then I think the PLA is more prepared for that. That is a conflict for which the PLA has been preparing for decades, arguably. Again, I think it really depends on which conflict we are talking about, where that occurs and how it features within the PLA's priorities.

- Q17 **Sarah Atherton:** I read in February of this year that there was a trilateral naval exercise between China, Iran and Russia, around the Gulf of Oman. I think it was described as the maritime security belt. What can we read from that exercise?

Meia Nouwens: I think what we read from that exercise is political signalling, rather than actual integration. There is a political image that the PLA would like to project—that it isn't alone and isn't going to fight alone, and that there is a stronger bloc of which it is a part, but in all truth, I think that is a reflection of symbolism, rather than reality.

At the end of the day, I think there is an expectation for the PLA that it will fight in a conflict alone, even with regards to Russia. The integration of the two forces is not as deep as we think. Sure, there is that co-operation and collaboration along some lines, but in terms of deep integration between the two forces, I still see a lack of trust between the two and an unwillingness to build a relationship that is close to an alliance, in the sense that one would risk and sacrifice for the other.

- Q18 **Sarah Atherton:** I was quite surprised at the sheer amount of equipment and manpower that the army, navy and air force have. Will the PLA, in your opinion, sacrifice mass to deal with the lack of precision?

Meia Nouwens: I think there is an effort to move away from mass towards precision. That has been ongoing since a failure of precision became evident to the PLA in the late 1990s—following, for example, the lessons it learned from the performance of the US in the Gulf war, or its inability to leverage missile strikes or sway Taiwanese voters in an election in Taiwan through intimidation and the use of missiles. Some of those missiles even failed.



In terms of mass versus precision, it is not one over the other, but the PLA certainly still does have the advantage of mass. That does not mean that it does not focus on precision as well. Precision is one of its main goals in modernisation. It has been upgrading its missile capabilities, and its entire focus has been on network-centric warfare, but also space and outer space, and its ability to leverage that as a domain, as well as a means. All of that points to the importance of precision for the PLA. It uses that to signal, by looking, for example, at pictures of mock-ups of aircraft carriers or frigates that have been targeted in PLA training grounds in western China.

Sarah Atherton: Thanks, Meia.

- Q19 **Chair:** Sarah mentioned the South China sea. Could we explore for a second what is happening there, and why the west is in denial that this is a chunk of territory that we should be more interested in—although we are putting aircraft carriers through there occasionally? It does seem that they are taking over these islands, and are eventually going to start controlling the airspace. Where do you see this going? What is the long-term trajectory of what China is trying to achieve there?

Meia Nouwens: We have seen the PLA in essence take at least three of the islands—the three with the largest military bases—under its control, despite promises it made in the past to the United States that it would not do so. In terms of what has happened in the East China sea, we have not yet seen China make a unilateral declaration of an air defence identification zone in the South China sea. I question whether that is something that China will do, considering that it has had absolutely no effect in the East China sea, as nobody else recognises it or respects it. I wonder whether that would be something that China would risk doing, given that it could be overturned, repressed or disrespected in the same way. China's long-term trajectory here is control, not necessarily in the sense that no other countries would be allowed to operate in the South China sea, but in the sense that any and all operations in the South China sea—around areas that China claims—would be done with China's approval and according to Chinese interests.

- Q20 **Chair:** Is the world doing enough to stand up to the nine-dotted line?

Meia Nouwens: The Permanent Court of Arbitration has come out with a ruling that is unequivocally not favourable to China. The fact that that has not had any impact shows the difficulty of pushing back on this. I think certain countries are lifting the weight, in terms of freedom of navigation operations and passages, and contesting these claims. Of course, more could be done, but I do not think we are going to be overturning or rolling back any of China's progress in the South China sea, unfortunately. That would be very difficult to do.

- Q21 **Chair:** Finally, can I ask about military-civil fusion? This is moving into the sub-threshold of conflict and so forth. Is China getting good at this? Is utility of the military now being blurred with other types of capabilities from the civilian effect?



Meia Nouwens: Yes, I think military-civil fusion has been prioritised in a way that we have not seen it prioritised in the past. It has been incentivised in a way that it has not been in China in past iterations of military-civil integration efforts. However, I think we overestimate the effectiveness of military-civil fusion in our analysis of it. If you look, for example, at the military-civil fusion innovation hubs in China, a number of them stand completely empty. It can be incentivised, but it cannot necessarily be forced.

We are still talking about two industries in China: the state-owned enterprises that dominate the defence industry landscape, and private sectors companies that have completely different cultures. Those two industries have a lack of mutual trust and speak different languages. There have been difficulties in meshing those two industries as far as has been prioritised or is wanted. It is a policy that has been under way for a few years now, but when we think about the successes of military-civil fusion—for example, the leveraging of Alibaba big data or the role of the private sector in—*[Inaudible.]* Those are, to a certain extent, exceptions to the rule. Those are not necessarily exemplary of the average result of military-civil fusion.

Q22 **John Spellar:** We talk all the time about China as if it is a monolithic entity. There has been a fashion in the media for basically describing Xi Jinping as not only the leader but completely dominant in all affairs. Is that the reality, or are there counter-forces who are concerned about what they might see as an adventurist policy, and a departure from Deng Xiaoping policy? Is that playing out within the Chinese system? We have seen some interesting recent statements on the economic side that seem to indicate some divergences of opinion within the system.

Meia Nouwens: Yes, there are divergences within the system—Professor Tsang is an expert in that and will be able to speak about it in more depth. Certainly, there are divergences in the system, but those are less frequent and less loud than they were in the past. I think the question of consensus rule has been rolled back within China, whereby effectively Xi Jinping's opinion is the one that matters. That does not mean there are not disagreements, but the consequences of voicing disagreement have become graver. We see fewer examples of disagreement in the public sphere.

As you said, we have seen pushback or disagreements with regards to economic policy. In the last few years, we have also seen disagreements over the importance and prioritisation of the belt and road initiative, and what China was getting out of it at the end of the day. So there certainly are disagreements but, as I said, Xi Jinping has effectively influenced Chinese politics and centralised his own power to such an extent that opposition is not necessarily overwhelming. There are, of course, disagreements.

Chair: John, thank you very much indeed. Meia, thank you—it has been a really informative session. We much appreciate you coming back to us this afternoon, so thank you on behalf of the Committee. We will now take a

pause.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Alessio Patalano and Professor Steve Tsang.

Chair: Welcome to this second session of the Defence Committee, looking at the Indo-Pacific. I am very pleased to welcome Professor Alessio Patalano from the Department of War Studies at King's College London, and Professor Steve Tsang, who is director of the SOAS China Institute. Welcome, and thank you both for joining us this afternoon. We will now step back from looking at China and look at the wider region.

Q23 **John Spellar:** Professor Tsang, how would you describe President Xi and China's approach to security and defence in the Indo-Pacific region?

Professor Tsang: China does not really see itself as a regional power; it takes a global view in terms of defence and security issues. What Xi Jinping wants to do is fundamentally about making China great again. Achieving dominance in the Asia-Pacific region—the Chinese still use "Asia-Pacific" rather than the Indo-Pacific concept—is a critical step towards China regaining its rightful place, from their perspective, in the world as a whole. Ultimately, the Chinese Government under Xi Jinping are not looking to replace the United States, but are expecting to become the world's first nation, and the most respected and admired country in the world—the centre of the world, if you like.

Q24 **John Spellar:** What would you say are the biggest obstacles to achieving that aim?

Professor Tsang: The USA. The first steps they will have to take will be to resolve the Taiwan situation to their satisfaction. They know perfectly well that to do so they will have to go eyeball to eyeball with the United States and require the United States to blink. If and when that is achieved, it will fundamentally change the global balance of power and the standing of the United States as the leader of the world. Basically, it will push the Americans to their side of the Pacific Ocean.

Xi Jinping was very open about that when he met President Obama in California in the early years of his leadership. He said very clearly that the Pacific Ocean was a very big place, and big enough for two. What he did not spell out, but which was clearly implied, was, "If you keep to your side of the Pacific Ocean, that will all be fine and we will be very good neighbours, but don't cross to my side of the Pacific Ocean."

Q25 **John Spellar:** You say that they have global ambition, but within the regional area, hasn't their build-up of military capability and their assertiveness over islands and so on started to build a pushback from other nations in the region, such as Japan, that have considerable industrial capacity as well as a growing military?

Professor Tsang: You are absolutely right in terms of the effect of the new assertive approach of the Chinese Government under Xi Jinping. This contrasts hugely with Hu Jintao, who went out of his way to try to

reassure the rest of the world that the rise of China would be peaceful, and that the rest of the world had nothing to worry about the rise of China.

Xi Jinping fundamentally took a different approach. He abandoned the policy from the time of Deng Xiaoping of hiding China's capabilities and biding for time. Xi Jinping takes the view that China's moment is nigh. China has become sufficiently rich and powerful that it will now request and require the rest of the world to pay its due respect, and the Chinese Government under Xi takes the simple view that territories, including maritime territories claimed by the Chinese Government, are properly Chinese and that they therefore have every right to do whatever they want with them. Whatever promises they might have made to others, they can still reinterpret that as they wish. That is exactly what they have done with the South China sea: having reassured the world that they would not militarise the islands they claim, those islands that they have built on are now full of military installations.

John Spellar: Thank you.

Chair: John, thank you very much indeed.

Q26 **Stuart Anderson:** Let us look at Beijing's view on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. How do they take that? Let me ask you first, Professor Patalano.

Professor Patalano: In order to answer your question very briefly, let me address the context here, because it is very important. In one headline, I would probably say that China's approach to regional security needs to be understood as strategically postured for global influence and militarily designed to achieve superiority in conflicts that might be related to outstanding sovereign claims. I am happy to elaborate on that if anyone has a follow-up question, but that is very important—the sense that there are global ambitions, but at the moment they are ambitions, and the pieces are being put in place but it is not a globally operating at a military level-type of organisation.

The original focus is very much at the heart of what we are talking about, because by 2027—we have discussed this before—the PLA needs to be in a position to deal with or take care of outstanding sovereign claims if, from a policy perspective, it is required to do so by CCP authorities. That goes from big claims, such as Taiwan and the outstanding offshore islands under Taiwanese control, to outstanding claims in the East and South China seas, as well as on the disputed border with India. That is an important point, because what is happening in Ukraine, as you can imagine, directly relates to this understanding of how the Chinese, from a military point of view, look at defence and security issues within their immediate neighbourhood. Those are the priorities and will remain as such.

Specifically, I will break down from a high-altitude, 30,000 feet-type of answer to the more operational and tactical. At the higher level, is what is happening in Ukraine changing the determination in terms of the timetable



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that we know the CCP has to hold a big celebration in 2049, when all the outstanding bits and bobs are back home, including Taiwan? No, not in the slightest. I think it would be absolutely the wrong assumption to suggest that or to take on board that what is happening in Ukraine is changing the determination to make that option possible and viable. What it is creating is an opportunity to understand the challenges to make that happen if it comes to an actual conflict over some of these issues—most importantly, Taiwan, which is the largest outstanding sovereign matter. So that is the first point: is it changing at the higher level? No, I don't think it is.

However, within that same bigger picture context, the overall proximity that the war in Ukraine has created between the US and Europe in a broader sense—the convergence—has also highlighted to Beijing the importance of understanding how you could prevent that from happening if push came to shove in a case such as Taiwan. I have been interacting over the last few days with former students in the PLA. One of the interesting things is that they are paying very close attention to whatever cracks in the wings of cohesiveness exist, because that will be one of the key lessons to take on board for them—how do you prevent the level of cohesiveness that you have seen close to the frontline in Ukraine from being recreated in an east Asian, Indo-Pacific context?

Certainly, the responses we have seen in the region, outside of the context of Japan, Singapore and South Korea—generally speaking, in south-east Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific including India—have been relatively neutral, if not muted, in terms of reaction to the war in Ukraine. In that sense, there are ever so slight gleams of hope, if you are in Beijing, that there is actually an element of ambivalence towards Ukraine, so you might want to focus on how to harvest the facts in a situation whereby a contingency around Taiwan would happen. Let's not forget also that the Chinese have been very clear that Ukraine and Taiwan are two very different things: Ukraine is a sovereign state; Taiwan is a province of China. They have been saying this across every single interaction that foreign officials have had as they were going throughout the region.

There are three points, and then I will stop—in fact, four quick points. First of all, so far, what they have seen that the Russians have failed in is in mobilising—in what the Chinese call the basic principles of warfare. So first, they failed to mobilise comprehensive national power. From a Chinese perspective, the Russians have failed, in a way, at their own game. What does that mean? A majority of the Chinese military down to senior colonel and colonel level—the core of it—is either trained in Russia or has done a period of training in Russia, or went through Russian military educational institutions. In that respect, there was a sense of shock that the Russians are failing at their own groundwork, as it were. Comprehensive national power—how to create the diplomatic conditions, how to insulate their economy before launching operations—the Russians are failing at that, and that is something they are taking on board.

Secondly, that will have an impact on reform and modernisation for the PLA. The PLA has been going through a significant restructuring since



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2016, in terms of command-and-control functions as well as joint command, if you want, at a combatant command level. What they notice is that the Russians have not been particularly good in terms of communications, command and control and creating a more organic approach to the operations. In other words, they are looking at Russian CONOPS and they are thinking, "What were they thinking?"

This also will change, I think, the way they think about the training with Russians, in the sense that in joint training, which has increased over the last four years quite considerably, the Chinese were paying a lot of close attention to the Russians because they valued Russian combat experience. I think this will change how they organise the structure of the training and how they look at Russians in terms of contributing to their own development in terms of advanced training.

The fourth point is about weapons and tactics. Again, there is an element of the morale of troops, as well as a lack of decent intelligence, particularly in so far as Ukrainian forces are considered. They are also looking very closely at the asymmetric nature of how distributed lethality is working against a larger force. In that sense, they are paying attention. Why are they also paying attention to this? Because in Taiwan, that is what they are looking at—civil defence and how to increase limited technology and asymmetry to create a greater distribution of lethality. In turn, that makes the attacker much more vulnerable. I will stop there.

Q27 Stuart Anderson: If I go back to, say, 1989 to 1991, when China began to shape the 2049 strategy, if they realised that they needed to desensitise from sanctions, has anything they have seen in the unity of sanctions on Russia changed their approach until 2027? To clarify, you said that if they wanted to take any areas on which they have claims, 2027 is when they could do so. Would you confirm that? If so, do you believe that in 2027 they will do that?

Professor Patalano: Those are excellent questions, particularly the second one, because it allows me to clarify that point, which is important. There is a fundamental distinction; let us start with that, because it is crucial. I need to be able to phone up the general staff of the PLA and say, "Guys, it's time to go," and they say, "Yes boss, we're going." That is one thing. The other thing is, "This is going to happen." 2027 is the centenary of the PLA, so it has been tasked with being capable enough to phase the need to deploy and recall outstanding soldiering for territorial disputes, particularly Taiwan. 2035 is another important deadline for the world-class military, all building up to 2049.

I always tell my students, as a way to put this in context, that there is a particular type of flaw with this approach. The Chinese have deadlines; we have got time—those are two different things. They suppose in their official narrative that they will be in a position to pull the trigger, as it were, at a particular point in time. That imposes an enormous amount of pressure. What we do not know—this goes to the second point in your question—is whether they will be able to meet that challenge.

The last two years have been hard for any serious China observer, because none of us has been able to be in China and spend decent time there. Since 2018, there has been a restriction on the level of engagement with the PLA and its various elements. It is hard from the outside to assess the extent to which the pressure generated by deadlines leads people to lie and say, "No, no—we're good. This is okay." It is hard to draw a distinction. However, we should start by noting that 2021 military exercises were the largest the Chinese have conducted.

Generally speaking, it depends on an ability to adapt to the unexpected. The extent to which these exercises are scripted is hard to judge, but looking at it from the outside, they were pretty advanced military manoeuvres. They were well co-ordinated, and the level of joint operation and communication capacity was pretty remarkable compared with previous exercises. In that sense, from the outside we are looking at something that is definitely designed to reach that position in 2027 and 2035.

- Q28 Stuart Anderson:** I have just finished a book on this, and it is very interesting. If we take 2049 as the long-term strategic vision, an attempt on Taiwan before 2027 seems unlikely, but between 2027 and 2035, an attempt on Taiwan that is miscalculated could prevent 2049 being achieved. Will that be a massive factor in the calculation in how China works moving forward?

Professor Patalano: Building on what Steve was saying earlier about Xi Jinping, this is something that Xi Jinping has crafted as part of his own narrative and the rejuvenation of China. By 2035, he will be over 80 years old, so if he misses that window it is not just a question of being in trouble with the 2049 deadline. There will also be a situation in which the leadership needs to start thinking about something else. Anything that makes it unlikely or difficult for the Chinese to pull the trigger before 2033 or 2035 might very well force the Chinese to think of an alternative narrative that does not include that military offensive or that military option as part of the solution to the problem.

Stuart Anderson: Thank you.

- Q29 Sarah Atherton:** You touched on India, and I just want to explore India some more. It has a trigger point: it has a 2,000-mile disputed border with China. What threats do you think India poses to China?

Professor Patalano: None whatsoever, in that sense. If it is about the border—I know you have been in the military, so I will be rather tactical—the Indian military needs to mobilise a considerable chunk of its entire arsenal to try to push the line a little bit. There is no way in which the Chinese might be looking at the Indians and saying, "This is a dangerous situation for us." There is a genuine geographic and deployment advantage that the Chinese terrain has, and that has been proved in the exchanges of fire in 2017 and 2020.

- Q30 Sarah Atherton:** So China is not concerned about the airbase that India is establishing on that border.



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Professor Patalano: I think there is an element of concern, but that is part of a tit-for-tat type of reshaping. From a strategic point of view, that is the bigger question. In particular, the war in Ukraine is where it becomes really interesting, and in parts explains how India has a very difficult position at the moment. Russia is weakened, and in the Indian calculation—quite rightly so, I think—it is likely that Russia gravitates much more closely to China.

In that sense, the Indians do not have the luxury of having a situation where not only is it the side of the border with China that is the trouble, but the part with Russia becomes part of that challenge. In that respect, when the Chinese are looking at Indian moves, they are looking at a situation whereby the Indians are trying as best they can to reduce their vulnerabilities and exposure at the strategic level in the case of a dispute over the border.

Q31 **Sarah Atherton:** Looking at India's alliances, and particularly the Quad, how effective do you think the Quad is?

Professor Patalano: From what perspective, if you don't mind me asking?

Sarah Atherton: The strategic direction that the Quad is taking. Is it a threat to China? Is China happy with what is going on in the Quad and the member states—Australia, India, Japan and the US? Is the Quad effective?

Professor Patalano: I will leave it to Steve to come back on the question of how China perceives the Quad. It depends very much on what we are expecting the Quad to do. The Quad is evolving as something that is not really an alliance, but certainly something that is much more of a talking shop. Now, we have working-level groups established on different issues. The direction of travel seems to be one in which the Quad is likely to deal a lot more with global challenges to peace and stability, and in particular to core assumptions about the international order—certainly, things that challenge United Nations Security Council resolutions and things that challenge UNCLOS. I think UNCLOS is the one bit, together with the resolutions of the Security Council, that constantly comes up in Quad statements, which are the ones that everybody needs to agree on.

Obviously, from an Indian perspective, within that context the Quad will also be a litmus test to see the interest in dealing with international terrorism, and in particular how international terrorism relates to the outstanding situation in Afghanistan, which from an Indian perspective is a very sensitive topic.

Q32 **Chair:** Professor Steve, do you want to come in on any of these points?

Professor Tsang: I am very happy to come in. In terms of the question about the Quad and India, Alessio is right that the Chinese underestimate the importance of India there, but India can actually be something that is much more worrying for China, particularly if the Quad becomes something that is much more than what it is today. The Chinese already factor in that if and when they try to fix Taiwan—meaning using force over



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Taiwan—Japan and Australia will be militarily supporting the United States. If India should be part of that, it will put a lot of pressure on the deployment of the PLA, because instead of being able to deploy everything they have on the Taiwan front, they will have to look after the China-India side as well. That is something that they would be a bit concerned about, but they are not overly concerned.

The point I really want to get back to is the Chinese view of the war in Ukraine and Russia. It is a fantastic demonstration of how you have big visions from the Chinese Government for how to make China great again and a disconnect in terms of the actual policy. The Ukraine war started as a huge miscalculation on the part of the Chinese and then it presented itself as a huge opportunity for China, and they totally squandered it. They miscalculated because they thought, when Putin was in China, Putin would be able to fix Ukraine very quickly.

They believe in the superiority of their system and the Russian system, so even though they didn't actually want a war in Ukraine, because they had a very good relationship with the Ukrainian Government, they went along with it in the expectation that a new Government in Ukraine would be even more pro-China than the one that was to be replaced.

When the Russians got in that whole mess, China had the uniquely well-placed position to make China great again globally by trying to play some kind of a peace-making role. It didn't, because Xi Jinping wasn't minded to do that; the Foreign Ministry in Beijing was. So we ended up seeing a Chinese policy towards the Ukraine war that amounts to clear neutrality, supports Putin and pays no price for any sanctions, which is incoherent, inconsistent and does not secure the kinds of strategic goals that the Chinese Government have set for themselves. We need to bear in mind the tremendous scope of the Chinese party today, under Xi Jinping, to make miscalculations and mistakes unintentionally.

Q33 **Chair:** On Sarah's point about the Quad, should Britain and France be invited to join given that we are having a tilt towards that neck of the woods?

Professor Tsang: If you want to make the Chinese Government more uncomfortable, that is a very—

Q34 **Chair:** So if we want to make the Chinese Government more uncomfortable, we should join.

Professor Tsang: Yes. They will be very uncomfortable about that. They want to make sure that if and when they try to fix Taiwan, Europe will not be part of the American side. They have a bit of suspicion that we will probably somehow be a part of that, but the rest of Europe is a different story.

Q35 **Chair:** That is interesting. Do you agree, Professor Alessio?

Professor Patalano: I have two points. The answer to your question demands a preliminary engagement with whether the UK has a China policy with Indo-Pacific bits in it, or an Indo-Pacific policy in which China is



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a component. I would assume that we are talking about the latter, given the tilt. In that context, one needs to have the Indo-Pacific feel comfortable about Britain, and less so France, given that they are an Indo-Pacific power. In that sense, the Quad represents an important opportunity.

If you look at the latest statement, the topics the Quad will be dealing with include COP26, covid, the disaster reliance initiative, 5G and post-5G. These are the type of topics that are part of the tilt and are part of what makes the British narrative about what the tilt is about very important and relevant to the reasons. The Quad is an opportunity to work with close partners and coalesce a narrative, and it provides a platform to present it. I think the Quad represents an absolutely critical opportunity.

- Q36 Stuart Anderson:** We were just talking about Russia potentially aligning more closely with China. About 70% of India's defence supplies come from Russia. They are haemorrhaging equipment at the moment. Will that impact the supply chain to India? Will Beijing see an opportunity there, with India potentially not having a supply chain? We have seen on a smaller scale how that can impact a military.

Professor Patalano: Yes, but it should be said that can be compared to the early 2000s. In 2018, India's dependency on Russia for defence imports had been decreased to about 35%. So yes, 70% of their equipment is still of Russian origin but not the new stuff. Over the years, they have already tried to reduce their dependency on Russia quite significantly. That has opened up opportunity, most notably with the United States.

Also, as part of the 2030 road map with the UK, the defence industry and defence co-operation are at the heart of that conversation. The Indians are painfully aware of that dependency from Russia, the problems it brings about and the vulnerability it creates in so far as China is concerned. That is, I would suggest, one key topic to keep in the conversation with India. In particular, it is also part of the Indian Government's own building domestically and reduced foreign dependency in that. There are opportunities, particularly in advanced capabilities, that would really be a great waste if one were not to look into them more attentively.

- Q37 Richard Drax:** Good afternoon. I will start with you, Professor Steve, if I may? How much emphasis should the UK put on engagement with the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as the UK tilts to the Indo-Pacific? Is it better for the UK to pursue bilateral relationships instead?

Professor Tsang: I do not see the two things as being mutually exclusive. The countries in south-east Asia are, generally speaking, uncomfortable with the resurgence of China. You have a few members of ASEAN that are already very dependent on China and therefore relatively relaxed about becoming even more dependent on China, but the majority of the others are very uncomfortable. ASEAN as a whole is still an effective organisation in moderating how south-east Asia as a whole engages with



China. Individually, they are all in a very bad place when they are dealing with China, but collectively they are in a better place when dealing with China. I think we should be engaging both with ASEAN and with individual member states of ASEAN to reassure them that they are not alone and they do not simply have to look at what happens to American presence in that part of the world. If the American presence should become weaker, they will feel that they have no choice but to do their deals with China.

Professor Patalano: I think Steve is absolutely right: these two are not in contradiction with each other or in a tension of sorts. The key element is that the UK has an incredibly variety of bilateral, minilateral and multilateral affiliations in the Indo-Pacific already—ASEAN dialogue partner being the last one that has joined. Now with CPTPP you have again another outlook there.

The question is: how do you start networking the bilateral, minilateral and multilateral affiliations that you have, so that they can work in an integrated and synergetic fashion? That is the key issue. That has been relatively unclear because some of the bilateral relationships are very well developed—take, for example, Japan, Australia and Singapore. The others are much less so, but they should do, so you have that element of the story.

Some of the minilaterals address specific issues. AUKUS is the best example. It is designed to provide in the region that deterrence component and deterrence point punishment in the long term that otherwise would be missing. Then the multilaterals like the Quad, or indeed ASEAN, are absolutely important for the wider political and economic processes. The question is not: which one? Rather, how do we network them together? Once you have done that, you can start prioritising resources based on opportunities and the level of engagement that one already has.

Within that context, ASEAN centrality is recognised by any institution or major actor as absolutely sacrosanct, and ASEAN dialogue partner status is the UK embracing that idea. In terms of prioritisation, I think the UK should focus on how to work with ASEAN to ensure that the ASEAN outlook towards the Indo-Pacific in substance is as close as possible to what the Indo-Pacific tilt means, or is supposed to be, and to try to present a sort of proximity between these two.

Q38 **Richard Drax:** Would it be fair to say that a lot more diplomacy is needed? From what Professor Steve was saying quite urgently, if this is not seen to, there is a risk that ASEAN might go back to China for no other reason than fear. A lot more action is needed by the West—diplomacy, presumably—to bring these countries much more into the fold and to reassure them. Is that a fair comment?

Professor Patalano: Yes. There are three moving parts: diplomacy, capabilities and institutional capacity. The key question that should be addressed across HMG—in particular, in the FCDO and the MoD—is: do we have sufficient institutional capacity to understand the region, present our



position to the region and engage with the region? Can we sustain continuing to create that institutional capacity? That is No. 1. Without that, we can have all the brilliant ideas in the world, but they are not going to go anywhere, because you need the people and the capacity to sustain that.

There is an element of capability already online, and the OPVs are doing a fantastic job in the sense of daily showing the face of what the UK stands for, but there are also other capabilities that there need to be more of—for example, Brunei, the logistical space in Singapore and the development of the Littoral Response Group (South).

Diplomacy has already been reinforced over the last three or four years with the current Government. Perhaps again it is more about the command-and-control function. Is the current structure the right one, or do we need an HMG regional hub, forward operating in the Pacific, that stands on top of the embassies and co-ordinates all of this, rather than doing everything from here in London? I am a strong proponent of that idea, because if you want a global posture, look at what the Chinese are doing. They are trying to develop the capacity to have different elements of their state operating forward in the places where they want to have a persistent engagement.

Q39 Richard Drax: Do you want to add anything to that, Professor Steve?

Professor Tsang: I am not inclined to think that we need to copy how the Chinese do things, but engaging with south-east Asia and building up the capacity in the UK to do that are important. At the moment, there is not enough expertise working on south-east Asia in this country, and that could be rectified at a relatively low cost. On where that hub should be—whether there should be a regional co-ordinator somewhere in the regions, or whether it could be co-ordinated from London—either option can work if the will is there and the resources are committed.

Q40 Chair: Richard asked about ASEAN. It is an organisation that I find a bit curious because it has everybody in it, and yet they are there to do defence. The United States participates as a dialogue partner, as does China and so forth. I think the United States refused to enter properly, didn't they? That was a few years back. Was that a mistake?

Professor Tsang: If one can be very blunt, ASEAN is a coalition of the weak. None of them individually is able to do very much. Even Indonesia, which is a very big country with a very large population, is not really able to play in the big leagues when it deals with China, the United States or some of the first-rank European powers. The strength of ASEAN, therefore, is that because it is a coalition of the weak, they tend to work together, albeit at a relatively low level of agreement. They agree to the lowest common denominator, in terms of what they can actually do. They accept that they are divided, but they somehow manage to hold themselves together, and they realise that there is strength in their unity. Adding a superpower to the mix would completely change the dynamics, and that might not be so beneficial to how such an institution can work.

Q41 **Chair:** And it is certainly not the vehicle, Professor Alessio, if we want to lean in to do greater security in the Pacific?

Professor Patalano: No. However, in so far as the UK is concerned, there are two elements there. That is the point that we were discussing with Richard a moment ago, about co-ordinating the bilateral, minilateral and multilateral. The UK has very strong bilateral relations with Singapore, it has a blossoming relationship with Vietnam, and it has, for all sorts of reasons, an interesting relationship with Indonesia and Malaysia. At the same time, it has the Five Power Defence Arrangements, which work on a yearly basis.

I would say that there are two ways to approach this question. One is to leverage the bilateral ties that one already has to understand how to better engage with it, in addition to having a direct relationship with it now, with the ambassador there. The other is through the Five Power Defence Arrangements. With defence and security, I would say, it depends very much on what you want to put on the agenda. If we are talking about maritime stability, the rules-based order or UNCLOS—that is the kind of space you can engage with.

Chair: That is very helpful.

Q42 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Good afternoon, professors. I will come to you first, Professor Patalano. You have both just discounted ASEAN as being critical to security in the region. What, out of the other arrangements between nations in the region, are the most critical to security there?

Professor Patalano: I did not discount ASEAN. I think, actually, the centrality of ASEAN should be a starting point for any conversation. It depends very much on the level of depth of security—

Mrs Lewell-Buck: In terms of security.

Professor Patalano: So, in that sense, for maritime stability, maritime security, maritime domain awareness and all that is related to the stability of the oceans that are the engines of prosperity of south-east Asia, as well as the broader region, ASEAN is absolutely a partner to engage with. Certainly, the UK should make it a priority to leverage more Five Power Defence Arrangements to that extent. In fact, part of the work that HMS Spey and HMS Tamar are doing at the moment is also focused on that. I think it would be a missed opportunity if one did not make those points. I wanted to put that on the record.

As for the other multilateral organisations that I think are important—starting with the big ones—you still have the UN Security Council with the resolutions in so far as the stability of the Korean peninsula is concerned. Because of the Korean war legal framework, the UK is still part of the command chain there and regularly performs ship-to-ship transfer checks through the resolution—in fact, I think HMS Tamar was doing that in February. At the higher level, you have the UN Security Council, non-proliferation treaty, Korean peninsula stability—that is one vehicle for that particular aspect.

Then, of course, you have the Quad, which is a very important relationship in so far as the global challenges are concerned—in particular, anything that has to do with global health, resilience and new technologies, particularly in terms of connectivity and prosperity. Those three themes have been coming up constantly on the joint statements. They are themes that, bilaterally, the UK has conversations with each member of the Quad about and, multilaterally, the Quad wants to get its hands into. It is something that is not contested and, in fact, it is welcome across the region. Again, the Quad for those global challenges is a great format.

In so far as the development of aspects of hardcore defence and security capabilities are concerned—particularly advanced science and tech, in so far as future capabilities are concerned—AUKUS is the other multilateral agreement. In addition, I think there is one important bilateral relationship, which is the defence relationship between Japan and the UK. So the development of the next-generation fighter jets and missile capabilities has a bilateral dimension, but it is an important one, because Japan is likely to be increasingly more interested at an industrial level in developing future capabilities in co-operation with other partners. The UK and Japan already have a well-developed framework of co-operation in that context.

So, the UN Security Council for some of the big things, the Quad for the global challenges, AUKUS for what I would say is the future of tech and science in defence and security, and the bilateral relationship with Japan are the four different formats that I would focus on, in addition to the value that ASEAN and, in particular, the Five Power Defence Arrangements have in so far as maritime stability in south-east Asia specifically is concerned.

Q43 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** So they are all critical for security, equally.

Professor Patalano: No, not equally. They perform different functions depending on the particular question that we are talking about. It is then a matter of prioritising the resources available. *[Interruption.]*

Chair: The Division bells are ringing, so I will have to draw this evidence session to a conclusion. On behalf of the Committee, thank you so much, Professor Alessio Patalano and Professor Steve Tsang, for a fascinating afternoon exploring this important issue of the developments in the Indo-Pacific. Thank you to the staff as well, and to colleagues. That brings this session to a close.