



International Relations and Defence Committee

Uncorrected oral evidence: Defence concepts and capabilities: from aspiration to reality

Wednesday 29 June 2022

10.30 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Anelay of St Johns (The Chair); Lord Anderson of Swansea; Baroness Blackstone; Lord Boateng; Lord Campbell of Pittenweem; Baroness Fall; Baroness Rawlings; Lord Stirrup; Lord Teverson; Lord Wood of Anfield.

Evidence Session No. 13

Heard in Public

Questions 93 - 99

Witnesses

I: Professor Alessio Patalano, Professor of War and Strategy in East Asia, King's College London; Michael Stephens, Associate Fellow, RUSI.

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Examination of witnesses

Professor Alessio Patalano and Michael Stephens.

Q93 **The Chair:** Good morning. I welcome to this meeting of the International Relations and Defence Select Committee of the House of Lords Professor Alessio Patalano, professor of war and strategy in east Asia at King's College London, and Michael Stephens, who is an associate fellow at RUSI. They are here to help us gather further evidence for our inquiry "Defence concepts and capabilities: from aspiration to reality".

At this stage, I always remind Members and witnesses, our guests, that everything in this session is on the record. It is broadcast and transcribed. When my colleagues ask questions, if they have a relevant interest to declare, they should do so at that point.

As ever, we will start with a rather more general question, which comes from me. Then I will call on my colleagues for more focused questions. As we progress through the morning, I anticipate that when my colleagues ask a question they may wish to follow it up immediately with a related supplementary question. If there is time at the end, I will open it up more widely, and Members' questions may range more widely.

Here is the first rather general question, setting the scene. The Integrated Review, published last year, endorsed a tilt to the Indo-Pacific in our UK strategy. Of course, it also has a range of enduring commitments in the Middle East. With a very unjustified and brutal war under way in Europe, and with our facing a clear threat from a hostile major power in our own home region, what would you say is the strategic rationale for the UK's extra-European commitments? Professor Patalano, may I invite you to go first on this occasion? After we have had the first question, I will leave it to you to decide who goes first.

Professor Alessio Patalano: Thank you kindly for the opportunity to join this conversation today, which speaks directly to an area of my expertise and is something I have been working on for quite a long time, long before the tilt became the tilt, as it were. I very much cherish the opportunity to be here today to share some views with you.

It is a very important question. General as it is, it is absolutely central. There are three points to it, in order to provide a satisfactory answer. First, as the Integrated Review laid out, the direction of travel in the stability of the international order is about the comeback of geopolitics and state-on-state competition. Within that context, these commitments are not a matter of either/or. We may not be interested in the Indo-Pacific because there is a war in eastern Europe, but that does not mean that the Indo-Pacific is not going to be interested in us.

Particularly because of this war, regardless of how it ends, there will be a strategic convergence between Russia and China. The world will shrink more as a weaker Russia finds in the warm embrace of China a possibility to come back in international relevance and significance. From an international order point of view, that convergence raises important

questions about the stability of the high north and the Arctic region, as well as the western Indian Ocean, which are the two places where the Euro-Atlantic, in a broad definition, and the Indo-Pacific come together.

We have certainly seen in the first reactions to and consequences of the war how Russia has found in China considerable support in some crucial respects. That is not going away. So the first point is about the stability of the international order, understood as it is today in terms of state-on-state competition, and what that means for us, regardless of what happens in eastern Europe, with a growing direction of travel that sees Russia and China become increasingly close.

The second point is about partners and allies. The Integrated Review, and indeed the whole direction of travel in the defence and security posture that the UK has elected to undertake, places allies and partners at the very heart of the ability to deliver effect. Some core allies—first and foremost, the United States—have an absolutely crucial interest in the Indo-Pacific. That is not going away. If anything, there must be some sort of awareness of what is going on in DC about this and how the United States approaches the region. To whatever extent one engages with it, one needs to understand what the problems are in order to be able to formulate a relevant response.

That is just one ally. Our important partners in the management of the international order in a broader sense include Japan, which today stands at the forefront of understanding the Russia-China convergence. That is why Japan is the country outside Europe that has provided the strongest support for sanctions and actions taken against Russia. There are others as well, from Australia and India to ASEAN countries with which we have commitments such as the Five Power Defence Arrangements.

This leads to the last point, which is a point worth making and reminding ourselves of. The tilt, as the name suggests, is a tilt. It is not a pivot. The capabilities earmarked for it were always going to be relatively tailored and bespoke. In that sense, the real question is not how much the fact that a war is happening in Europe undermines our commitment, but to what extent the commitments that were made in the first place, through the Integrated Review and the Command Paper, were oversized for what one can deliver. I would say that they were actually quite tailored and bespoke, in order not to be in a situation where one overpromises and underdelivers.

Those are the three points: international order, partners and allies, and how we understand the capabilities that are involved in the tilt.

Michael Stephens: That is a fantastic answer, which I will not try to photocopy. I will go through my own way of explaining this.

Over the last 15 years that I have been doing this job, I have often been asked to rationalise, justify and give some sort of credence to our disproportionate weight of attention on the Middle East. To be honest, over the last 15 years I have struggled sometimes. Outwith explosions of

internecine conflict and terrorism, it was quite difficult to make that case. Since Russia invaded Ukraine, we have been reminded quite forcefully just how important the Gulf states, in particular, are. I would not say that this is a 1973 moment all over again, but there is a reason that Joe Biden is going to Riyadh on 16 July, which is that under the last three Presidents the US presidency has increasingly tried to pull away from the Middle East and found that the more you do that, the more you get reminded why it is a foolish idea.

On top of that I put our national interests, which are aligned closely with those of the United States but preceded them and, in my view, will outlast them. We have some sense of cultural and historic ties to the region, which are reflected at the elite-to-elite level. I do not think that there is any plan to withdraw from those any time soon. Our prosperity agenda, which was outlined quite clearly in the Integrated Review, overlaps with the security agenda. In the last few days, a prospective free trade agreement with the Gulf states has been published, which means that all those dominos stack up at the same time as the southern part of the Middle East, the Gulf states, has found a geopolitical voice once more.

It has been encouraging to see that some of their internal divides have been put aside, in recognition of the fact that there is a much larger question at play, which has obviously played out for most of us in our heating bills. I am afraid to say that in October we will all be paying the costs of that. Without that engagement, we will have a very difficult time indeed, possibly, if Mr Putin continues his activities in Ukraine, for half a decade, even a decade.

At this point, without that level of engagement with the Gulf states, which happen to be in an extremely insecure region, we cannot, I think, justify any type of movement towards energy autonomy, a greener and cleaner future in our energy mix and securing our own European frontier. It may be the case that, over the last 10 years, when the Americans talked about NATO what they meant was Europe, and what they meant by Europe was the UK, France and Germany leading on European security questions, but those are now intimately tied into wider global lenses. That is where the Middle East is becoming central.

Weirdly, the rationale for engaging quite assertively in the Middle East has been answered for us, with this caveat. Even if there were no Russian invasion of Ukraine, we cannot lose attention on the Middle East, particularly as Iran restarts its negotiations in Qatar with the United States and the P5 and, when those go badly, starts to do things such as attack ships and cause instability in a major waterway that is of interest to very close partners of ours. That notwithstanding, I think it would be very foolish to start to pull back from our commitments in that part of the world.

No better is that reflected than in our defence and security partnerships, not just for their ability to provide capacity, training and capability for those states, but as a measure of our political commitment, including our

emotional support. They show that we are there for those states in a very uncertain time. It is also the case that, if we plot this out over the next 50 years, we, alongside the US and, I am sure, the French, would like states with more capacity in the region to begin securing the region a bit better for themselves. I will leave it there.

The Chair: Thank you for a very lively start. You have outlined some of the very challenging issues that we need to face. Lord Boateng, over to you.

Q94 **Lord Boateng:** Who are the UK's most important allies in the Indo-Pacific, and why? What expectations do they have of us and what can we expect in return from them? Does the defence Command Paper adequately reflect and respond to those expectations?

Professor Alessio Patalano: First, a small caveat is important. There is a distinction between allies and partners. The Indo-Pacific is a place where, from a diplomatic and a political point of view, the capacity to join different formations—a certain flexibility, if you will—prevents very structured alliances in the way that we might have in the Euro-Atlantic region, so I will answer the question by looking at the matter of allies and partners. Even though we may not have formal alliances, with Article 5-like provisions, with some of the countries in the region, that does not mean that they are not absolutely crucial to UK national security, as well as to the capacity of the UK to shape the environment in that part of the world.

Within that context, there are two sets of relationships. One unfolds first and foremost from the alliance with the United States and, in a broader sense, the Five Eyes, who all, including Canada, which has recently discovered its Pacific dimension, happen to be Indo-Pacific actors. Then you have legacy frameworks that are very important to the UK and link the UK to some of the key actors in the region. The Five Power Defence Arrangements link the UK to Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Malaysia. There are legacy frameworks, such as the one concerning the Korean War; theoretically, if the peninsula goes hot again, the UK is part of the UN command that is supposed to contribute to the response to that. There is a general set of frameworks that the UK is part of and that are part of this conversation.

Having said that, short of the alliance links with the United States and, through the Five Eyes, with Australia, New Zealand and Canada, I would list the most important allies in the Indo-Pacific as follows: Japan, Australia, Singapore and Brunei, and then even Oman and Bahrain. I will leave Bahrain aside for Michael to come back to, and explain why I have listed them in that way. Within that context, there is an element of placing India in there. I will come back to that in a second.

Japan has the most developed defence and security partnership with the UK in the entire region. One of the key elements changed in 2017, when both Governments committed to what is known as a joint action plan, which is revised every three years and provides specific targets for co-

operation to be developed. It is a very comprehensive partnership. It is not just about defence and security based on a convergence of views about international geopolitics. It is also a convergence that looks at understanding the importance of the rule of law in the international order, as well as broader agendas today, such as climate and the impact on elements of security. In that sense, Japan is at the very top, if anything, because you have convergence in these three core areas: geopolitics and understanding of the international order; appreciation of the rule of law and how it matters, both in the Euro-Atlantic and in the Indo-Pacific; and new items of security risk, such as climate.

In addition, there is a defence-industrial co-operation dimension, which is important, particularly if you look at the future generation of fighters, missiles and ammunition. These are projects in which we have experimented with the United States or partners in Europe, outside the context of a partnership. Japan is the only country so far with which we have had that type of relationship.

Underneath that are what I call the key partners or, if you will, the most important allies/partners as we move forward: the relationships that one is building and that will play a central role. There I would say that Australia and India are absolutely essential: Australia for a number of reasons, not least the future defence and technology aspects of security, and India because it can increase the UK's capacity to have an impact and a shaping function in the Indian Ocean.

Singapore and Brunei, within ASEAN, remain very important, not only, first and foremost, because of long-standing heritage ties but because of logistical support and, in the case of Brunei, the Army jungle warfare centre. In that context, looking ahead, Oman and Bahrain, particularly with the base in Duqm, represent two very important partners for creating the logistical foundations of meaningful UK engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Regardless of the type of capabilities you have, you cannot be in the Indo-Pacific without strong logistical support. With countries such as Oman, Singapore, Brunei and Bahrain, at the beginning, and with the reciprocal access agreement with Japan and Australia, you start to have a series of nodes that create a sustainable network for meaningful engagement.

How did the Command Paper set the expectation? With the two OPVs, one littoral response group and one Type 31 later in the 2020s, I think that it set the right level of expectation. It did not overpromise or underdeliver. In part, that is because it tried to corner the contribution to maintaining a meaningful capacity to respond to the question of maintaining the rule of law in what is a maritime-centric space. From a geopolitical point of view, having the two OPVs doing the daily job of creating capacity, supporting others to implement governance and, indeed, responding to some of the very central crises—most notably, man-made and natural disasters—allows the UK, with limited capabilities, to deliver on the type of expectation that is set out in the Integrated Review and the Command Paper: daily occupying the space of

implementing the rule of law and ensuring that one has the capacity to respond to the core crises. I will leave the kinetic aspects for the later questions that I am sure we are going to cover.

So far, what has been the response? I think the response has been quite positive. In February, at exactly the same time as the beginning of the hostilities in Ukraine, HMS "Tamar" was implementing the ship-to-ship transfer resolution by the UN Security Council on North Korea, while HMS "Spey" was rerouting from Tahiti to provide support and assistance. In fact, it became the first responder to the volcanic eruption in Tonga that separated the country from the rest of the world. That provided a good practical manifestation of how the Command Paper sets a particular set of expectations that have indeed not been let down by the practice of daily activity. I will stop there and come back to some of the points later.

The Chair: As we go through and my colleagues ask both their initial and their supplementary questions, you will not both need to answer the questions, because they will be focused on specific areas. I am saying this just from the point of view of the broadcast. It is not a case of somebody having nothing to say. It is just that, in the interests of time, we are trying to focus on the main areas of expertise.

Lord Boateng: Professor Patalano, you referred to the "warm embrace" of China. I wonder how warm that is. Has China not always been rather wary of the Russian bear? Is it not more of an air kiss than a warm embrace? In that context, in 2005 we saw the establishment of the New Asian-African Strategic Partnership, which harked back to the Bandung Conference 50 years before. In the course of the votes on Ukraine at the UN, arguably we have seen the emergence of a new non-aligned movement. You have not mentioned Indonesia at all. Indonesia has traditionally had a very close relationship with India. Both of them have close relationships in Africa. How does that play to your view of what developments we might expect in this area?

Professor Alessio Patalano: That is an excellent question. I love it, because it allows me to make a supplementary point. No warm embrace is cost free. That is particularly true when it comes to China and Russia. I completely agree with you that, from a Chinese perspective, which is where my expertise lies, there will always be a cost-benefit analysis when it comes to how far to provide support to Russia.

Let me bring you to the 4 February joint statement, because that document is very telling of the type of relationship one should expect. As someone who works very frequently and regularly with the Chinese, I can tell you that the trick is in the specific wording of any single paragraph and the core sentence in it. The vocabulary of the joint statement of 4 February is very telling. Every single time there is a topic that pertains to Russian core interests, the Chinese express "sympathy" to it, whereas on every point that matters to the Chinese, their Russian counterparts express "support" for the Chinese position. That is telling about the balance of power between the two actors before the war started.

In my view, at the moment all sources—at least, all open sources—suggest that this will be even more radical, in the sense that the Russians will have to give more and still wait for the Chinese to decide what they are going to give back. That imbalance in the relationship, in which Russia is the junior partner to China, is something that is likely to increase, not decrease. That is part of where the Chinese calculation over the cost comes into play. How much are they willing to give in exchange for what?

Your point about south-east Asia, particularly Indonesia, and Africa is absolutely at the heart of the answer to that. Where do you find the balance? We have seen that, outside the context of Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, Australia and South Korea, the general response across south-east Asia and a good deal of the Indo-Pacific to sanctions and western European attitudes towards Russia has been relatively weak, if not ambivalent. In many cases, that is true in Africa as well. The point that you were making implicitly, that you see a new actor emerging, with China leading the global south, largely, and developing countries, is absolutely right.

That reinforces the original question that the Chair asked about why these other areas matter. At the end of the day, at the UN there are 180-odd state actors. Their votes all count. This cannot be about the West versus the others. In that context, that is why your question is so important. It highlights exactly why we need to continue to be engaged with actors other than those who are more likely to support our behaviour and endeavours.

That is where the Chinese calculation is very important. For the Chinese authorities, on topics that are not essential, central or core to their policy, a win is everybody else staying neutral. We saw that with the 2016 awards in the South China Sea case, where they literally coloured as on their side any country that did not say anything about the awards or was very bland about them, to the point where even the European Union came across, in that colouring, as on the Chinese side. In that sense, we have to be careful.

I agree with you that the convergence will always be somehow a forced one, but it is one in which the cost-benefit analysis mirrors two factors. First, what is the level of expectation? What does a win look like? What is your theory of victory? On most things, for the Chinese, the theory of victory is anyone who does not side against you. Secondly, how does it translate into maintaining sway in multilateral organisations, most notably the United Nations?

Lord Boateng: Thank you.

Q95 **Baroness Blackstone:** Could you elaborate a little on the role and purpose of the UK's defence infrastructure in the region, notably in Singapore and Diego Garcia, and anywhere else you want to comment on? Could you tell the committee how adequate you think that is?

Professor Alessio Patalano: I will take the first bit. The Indo-Pacific is understood as a relatively wide area. When it comes to logistical infrastructure, the enabling component of UK defence capabilities, at least as it is defined in the defence Command Paper and the Integrated Review, you need to start with Duqm in Oman. Then you put into that context, to an extent, facilities in Diego Garcia. They are used by the UK military, but they are leased to the United States. Then you have Singapore, which is going through a degree of transition. The current facilities will be transferred to a different part of Singapore, partly because the Singaporeans want to turn the waterfront, where the pier is at the moment, into a tourist attraction. It is the sort of reconversion that you see very often these days. Still, Singapore is on board. Then you have Brunei. That is the core of it.

At the moment, the reality of it is relatively light, but at the same time, the current capabilities that are forward-operating are very light in terms of demands for logistical support and maintenance. HMS "Spey" and HMS "Tamar" are the greenest ships in the Royal Navy. They meet the highest environmental impact standards and requirements, which means that they can be serviced at pretty much any port, civilian or military, across the region. That was a choice made specifically to reduce the impact and the requirements of logistics.

Looking forward, in the deployment of the littoral response group and then the Type 31, the logistical requirements will definitely increase. That will certainly raise a question as to whether a combination of the facilities that I have just mentioned, with the addition of the reciprocal access agreements developed with Japan and Australia, will be sufficient to maintain those capabilities, particularly their maximum availability in the region over a sustained period.

That said, there are two important variables that we have not discussed. We do not have the answer at the moment, but they will be essential to how sustainable the effort is. One is the development of the logistical base in Duqm. On paper, because of the support that it needs to provide to LRG (South), that may be quite considerable. The other element is how much the development of AUKUS, particularly the development of joint capabilities, creates an opportunity for additional logistical support based in Australia, which at the moment we do not necessarily have.

The crucial importance of your question rests on something else, which is not necessarily the hard core of the logistics, but the software. In other words, for the capabilities to be of any worth, you need, first, the bits and bobs that support them, the logistics, and, secondly, the command structure. The really interesting element of your question is whether we currently have a command structure that allows us to make the most in operational terms of whatever capabilities we have developed and deployed in that part of the world.

Given the fact that most of the operational activities are run in Northwood, from Permanent Joint Headquarters, there is a genuine question to ask about whether one should not start considering the

desirability of a forward-operating command structure in the region that, first, co-ordinates all the various capabilities stretching from Duqm to Brunei, if not further, fast-forwarding a few years; and, secondly, integrates the use of those capabilities with all other aspects of HMG, whether it is the prosperity agenda, responding to climate change disasters or promoting defence engagement and co-operation. That is the sort of story that the Integrated Review laid out so well. It is about how you maximise effect; it is not necessarily how big you are, but how the different levers of power are integrated.

The key questions are: first, looking forward, will Duqm be sufficient to complement what we have at the moment to have that sustainable nature; and, secondly, will other bits appear in Australia, for example, to complement that? Crucially, looking ahead, even if we have all of that, will we have the command structure that allows us to maximise our capabilities and activities in the region and to integrate them fully into the other levers of power? To me, that is an even more important question.

Baroness Blackstone: Thank you very much. You ask whether we will have the command structure that is needed, but you have not given an answer as to whether you think the Government are capable of developing that, or how they might do so. If I may say so, all your answers so far could have been made by officials rather than by a professor in a university that is well known for defence studies. I wonder whether, in responding to the question about command structure, you can indicate whether you have any criticisms of the way in which the Government have taken on the tilt to the Indo-Pacific, and other things that they have not done but should do. So far, that has not really come out in your answers. Perhaps you do not have any criticisms.

Professor Alessio Patalano: The capacity to implement that is part of the conversation that seems to be coming across in my research. There are different stakeholders in HMG who feel that the current command structure is perhaps not adequate, and there is a conversation to have to develop it. The Command Paper talks only about upscaling British defence staff, which is a different thing, so there is definitely a blind spot in the command structure, which is why I am raising the question. I might have an opinion—indeed, I think it is needed—but it is not up to me to decide whether to ask the Government the question. All I can do is highlight that the current command structure might not be the most suitable or desirable to maximise the effects.

As regards the other limitations you asked me about, at the moment the real problem is that any capabilities in addition to the current OPVs that have been deployed in the region—LRG (South) and Type 31—are scheduled between 2023 and later in the 2020s, but from a financial point of view the extent to which they will be realised is unclear. For example, it is unclear to what extent LRG (South) will take the same shape as LRG (North) has at the moment, which has HMS Albion. If it does, where are the capabilities for supporting that? That is unclear. The

development of the logistics structure in Duqm continues to proceed, but, again, whether it will extend to having the capacity to bring to bear in a way that serves the purpose remains an open question.

I think the Command Paper identified the right mix of capabilities to meet the requirements of what the Integrated Review set out for the Indo-Pacific deal. However, although things are advancing, and the deployment of the OPVs, in addition to CSG21, has delivered so far, what is unclear is the extent to which there will be a financial commitment to translate what at the moment is an ambition on paper into reality. So far, as of February to May 2022, that seems to be on track. Beyond that, the inflation risks that we are facing might put it at risk. That is something to keep an eye on, but is it really a problem at the moment? No, at the moment things are proceeding as originally set out.

Baroness Blackstone: Thank you.

The Chair: Our last question on the Indo-Pacific will come from Baroness Fall. I invite you to be relatively brief in responding, which I know is difficult on such an important matter, but I want time for us to be able to focus on the Middle East and hear from Michael Stephens.

Q96 **Baroness Fall:** AUKUS was generally well received and considered an ambitious programme. You touched on this in your last answer, but to what extent do you think it shifts the security dynamic in the region, and does it remain so after the Australian election? How involved will the UK really be in it?

Professor Alessio Patalano: May I ask what you mean by a shift in security dynamics in the region?

Baroness Fall: What do you see as the impact on the region's security dynamics in relation to neighbours such as China?

Professor Alessio Patalano: Let us start with what have perhaps been the harshest criticisms, which have been constantly referred to. Two weeks ago I was in Prague for the EU-sponsored high-level Indo-Pacific meeting, where the representative from Indonesia made the point that minilateral pacts had been signed recently that might undermine regional stability. That was a clear reference to AUKUS, mostly because nothing else has been signed recently in that regard.

Baroness Fall: Yes.

Professor Alessio Patalano: Indonesia's criticisms have been quite clear. Certainly, they are remarkably similar to objections to AUKUS raised in both Russia and China. Beyond that, I do not think there has been a negative response to AUKUS, partly because there is general recognition that the environment has been degrading and that China's more muscular assertion across the region, from the South China Sea to the East China Sea, not just in military terms but economically and diplomatically, forced actors to start looking into options and recalibrations of their own assessments. Australia had the strategic

update in 2020, which reflected that, but it is not just common to Australia; there are other actors in this.

To what extent does AUKUS make a difference? First and foremost, I would describe AUKUS as a technology accelerator agreement. It is not a defence agreement; it is about future capabilities. In that sense, it starts with a critical component. As we look ahead, in that kind of theatre, submarines, in particular those with advanced technology and capabilities, will be absolutely essential in an overall deterrence by denial posture or indeed the capacity to respond to any unfolding major crisis. In the initial emphasis, it is the right type of capability, and it builds on a necessity for Australia.

The agreement over AUKUS has not changed. Between Prime Minister Albanese and both Labour and Conservatives in Australia there is overall agreement on the importance and desirability of AUKUS, particularly because of the role that submarine capabilities will have in Australia's future defence posture. So there is agreement on that and, although the tone of how Australia relates to China might change a little, I do not think there will be a change in content. Penny Wong, the new Foreign Minister, is a long-standing China observer, and what she writes and says is very much attuned in substance with the previous Morrison Government.

AUKUS is the beginning of an interesting story with real potential. In the first year, 17 working groups have already been established, nine of which are on the submarine programme, and eight on the advanced technology, with a focus on cyber, quantum and future underwater capabilities. From the surface of what the Governments have published so far on the agenda for the development of AUKUS, as well as the specific content of the areas they want to focus on, they all seem to be delivering on the original ideas that were set out.

What remains absolutely unclear—I will stop here—is the role of the UK in it, and to what extent the UK will be part of the nuclear technology transfer, or whether and to what extent the UK will be involved in the development of the next generation submarine capabilities. In terms of the potential of the submarine force that Australia is looking at, the shape, career path and force structure is much closer to what we have in the UK, as opposed to what the US has, but it remains very unclear at the moment who will be doing what and the extent to which each party will be involved. The answer to that question will be particularly important for understanding the extent to which Australia, through AUKUS, becomes a core anchor in the way the tilt will be implemented looking ahead.

The Chair: Thank you. I regret that there will not be time for a supplementary. We need to move on to the Middle East, and I call on Lord Stirrup.

Q97 **Lord Stirrup:** The first chapter of the defence Command Paper is, "Changing strategic context". In it, there is this sentence: "Iran and North Korea will continue to pose regional challenges and their nuclear

programmes threaten global stability". That is it; nothing else about the Middle East. In the chapter, "Evolving for the future", it says: "Further investment in Oman and increased deployments to the country and the region will demonstrate our long-term commitment to the Gulf's stability and prosperity". That is it; nothing else about the Middle East. The chapter on "Defence's contribution to Global Britain" lists our long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Cooperation Council, our work with Oman and Qatar, and what we have been doing in Iraq, Syria and a few other countries. These are all things that we have been doing.

If I were coming to this afresh, with no previous knowledge, I would say, "Well, the defence Command Paper has a vast panoply of aspirations and very limited resources. Quite clearly, the MoD does not consider the Middle East to be a relatively high priority in strategic terms, and therefore we should forget about any serious investment or work in that area". From your opening comments, Michael Stephens, I assume that you do not agree with that, so if you were drafting an insert to the defence Command Paper to rectify that situation, what would it say? What would be our strategic priorities and where would they lie in the wider range of defence priorities?

Michael Stephens: That is a good question. In the section in the Integrated Review on the UK as "a European country with global interests", there are five pages of allies and the Middle East starts at the bottom of the fourth page, just above Latin America, so you can see where people were going at the time those papers were written.

I go back to my initial answer: there were a lot of signals coming from the US Administration that they were getting rather frustrated and bored and had had enough of the Middle East. Afghanistan was tied into that, and we all know the debate that happened there. Ultimately, the Middle East was packaged into a belief that it was permanently unstable, there was not much we could do about it, there were bigger problems elsewhere and why were we wasting our time. I have lost count of the number of times over the years that I have heard those sentiments expressed either tacitly or even explicitly by officials in a number of countries.

My view is this. If I was to insert a clause in the Defence Command Paper, I would say that there are explicit commitments that we need to make to allied countries to build our capacity emotionally, strategically and logistically for the next 50 years, which are a sine qua non of our global posture. That would indeed include Oman and Jordan as our two emotionally closest friends in the region; I would explicitly put them there. I was pleased that the Integrated Review explicitly mentioned those two countries. Most of you have read your history and will know exactly why I think that. Alliances need to be reinforced emotionally as well as in logistics and the quid pro quos of what you get.

On top of that, if we are to seek a safer world, our defence infrastructure needs to be intimately tied into the Middle East region for the next two, if not three, decades—thinking out to 2050—which aligns with the

aspirations of the states in the region themselves. In what that looks like practically on the ground, I would not change much. I do not think there is much more we need to be doing on numbers and visibility. The Queen Elizabeth carrier pulling up near Duqm is a pretty impressive sight; I do not think we need to be doing more of that. It is enough as it is. Alessio can explain exactly what commitments the carriers have to make.

Having said that, I think there is a part of our Middle East relationship, expressed through defence, which builds alliances that are quite unlike anything else I have seen in the region, or even in the rest of Asia. Bear in mind that these are not democracies, with the exception of Israel, and Iraq and Lebanon are a bit fragile. We are working not with NATO allies but with autocratic states that are difficult and politically contentious to deal with, but we must stress their strategic importance, and that needs to be done primarily through defence. That was the whole point, Lord Stirrup, of the 2015 Gulf strategy. It was to express through defence a wider set of strategic goals that could be built through that spine. I would go back to that paper and start looking at the aspects of it that should be expressed more clearly through the defence Command Paper. I do not think we need to elucidate exactly how that needs to be done; it is about the messaging that comes with it.

Lord Stirrup: Thank you.

Q98 **Lord Teverson:** I will move on from my question as it has partly been covered. It was about who are the UK's most important allies in the Middle East, and why. To a degree, you have talked about that. What expectations do they have of us? You have already gone into those aspects of the defence Command Paper. You mentioned Jordan and Oman; they are pretty minor players, are they not? They are about 150 or something in the world among the United Nations. I do not know; it may be more.

Michael Stephens: I will pick up Alessio's point about partners and allies. We have one explicit ally in the Middle East region, which is Turkey. We are linked through our NATO relationship, and it is our most important ally. The addendum to my point is that Turkey's strategic questions are, whether we like it or not, our strategic questions. Obviously, that was expressed in what happened yesterday and the issues, as you know, concerning the expansion of Sweden and Finland, in which Mr Erdoğan's tactical concerns on his southern border become a lot more important to Swedes and Finns than they might otherwise like.

I put that there for assessment. An ally needs to be assessed through a combination of three factors. The first, absolutely, is utilitarian, whether it is money, military power or strategic influence. Secondly, I come back to the emotional aspect, which can sometimes be more important than the utilitarian aspect. The third is the ability to be a force multiplier for your own interests in the region.

The most utilitarian actor in our partnerships is Israel. Israel is the only country in the region that we buy technology from. We are not buying

technology from the Iraqis or from Oman. We are not learning more about our cyber or drone capabilities through our engagements with those countries. It is done through sales. With Israel, we have a unique partnership in which we are learning from them, and they are learning from us. That has been building since 2016-17. The problem with Israel is that it comes with all the other issues that you know very well, about the occupation and the fact that, let us be honest, if Jeremy Corbyn was Prime Minister, we would not be having that conversation with Israel, as, in my view, the No. 2 actor in the region we need deal with.

Then you start to get into very complex territory. It is what I alluded to earlier. It is the autocracies, those that, frankly, do things that we do not like, and when we say "allies", all of a sudden we are opening ourselves up to some very uncomfortable conversations about football stadiums, journalists or whatever it is. I think that is all well understood. We have to be very careful about how we define a partner and how we define an ally. In my view, Jordan and Oman are allies. In terms of the emotional linkage, they are clearly far more important to us in our historical perspective, than, say, Saudi Arabia, which is of course far richer and far more powerful, and more of a force multiplier for our interests. That does not mean that I am denigrating Saudi Arabia, or even the UAE, which is incredibly capable in its own right and is where we have 200,000 Brits all working relatively tax free and sending back remittances.

This is a subjective answer. I am not giving you an objective assessment of how an ally should be defined, but, in my view, in 2022 we need to be telling our friends that they are our friends. It is an unstable world out there. Our friends are looking for overt signs in our engagement and our emotional relationship that we will be there for them, come what may. Do not forget why Russia has now become so influential in the region: it stood by its partners at a time when we wavered back in 2010-11. States in the region that exist in a highly insecure environment need that type of friendship.

You mentioned that Bahrain was an ally. I get a bit worried about that. Yes, we have a very significant naval presence there—Operation Kipion comes out of Mina Salman port—and we cannot do without the Bahrainis in terms of the infrastructure that exists there. We have continuous operations in the area that they help us with. Having said that, we have engaged with the Bahrainis, and I remember talking to Lord Campbell, who was, I think, Sir Ming back then, about some of the troubles that were going on in Bahrain and how that caused great problems for our position as a moral actor in the world. I believe that to be global Britain you have to have a moral component. You cannot just be utilitarian and act as though \$700 billion-worth of economic performance in Saudi Arabia immediately means that it is your most important ally. It does not.

That is my view, based on how I perceive our role in the world. I will wrap it up by saying that we have to engage with these states, and we are engaging with them. Lord Stirrup's point about how we could express that in military terms is already well done practically. We need to connect

that to a more overt sense of commitment in the future. That is with the spectre of Iran looming in the background, which will not go away. The Islamic Republic will be a security threat for many years to come, and if we are not making commitments to the security of those states, that will be a problem.

Lord Teverson: Our clerk very kindly circulated a paper that was published in *Fathom*. It was a book review that you were involved with. You were one of the commentators. One of the themes was that we were expecting to do too much in the Middle East, and that we should concentrate on certain things and do them better. You raised human rights and the contradictions of foreign policy in that area, and it was also a theme that in much of the Middle East we just follow the United States, and we are not seen as very independent. In fact, it seems to me that in Israel-Palestine and Iran we have traditionally followed the EU in some ways, in our attitudes. I am interested in your further comments on that. Also, if we got rid of our sovereign bases in Cyprus and got out of the region, who would actually notice?

Michael Stephens: My immediate reaction to that is that it would be a big mistake. Akrotiri brought us a huge amount of capacity and capability to act in highly insecure areas, by which I mean the more northern areas of the Middle East, Syria and Iraq. As much as Turkey is a NATO ally, it charges us a high price for our access to Incirlik. Akrotiri is essential for Mediterranean security, and I say that with ongoing concern about the stability of Egypt, and Libya as well, and potential problems that emanate between NATO allies Turkey and Greece—who, let us be honest, are not particularly allies. We would lose a huge amount of capability if we did that. I put on record that Akrotiri was a rather useful base for making sure that the Israelis were doing what they said they were doing. There was a long and established programme, alongside the US, to make sure that the Israelis were—how shall I say it?—following human rights legislation. I think it is fair to say that.

I would not do that. We can supplement Akrotiri by basing infrastructure in Erbil, which we did when ISIS took over half the country. That was more difficult because it was in Kurdish territory, and I think we created some expectations among the Kurds that we were going to support independence, and that went wrong.

On your point about the US, the *Fathom* paper was an interview with me about the book I had written. In the book I talk extensively about our relationship with the US; I wrote a chapter on it. My view is that the US remains the most powerful actor in the Middle East. There is nobody else out there. The Russians tried and were only able to open a little base here and there, and their aircraft carrier did not do too well; they overstretched themselves. The US is so far and away the most powerful actor in the region in security provision that it would be very mistaken to go against its strategic priorities. The problem comes when the US starts to say, "Actually, this isn't important any more". Sometimes, as the UK, it is best to say nothing when your friend is making a mistake. The current

Government have urged the US to be more interested in the Middle East, and that is one of the reasons—not the only reason—why Biden will be going to Saudi Arabia in July. The Americans seem to have rediscovered what they perhaps wanted to forget.

The short answer to your question—sorry that I have given a long one—is simply this. Although there are diminishing returns from our security investments in those parts of the world, to ignore them would be a very big mistake, in the sense that internal security issues remain, be they emanating from Libya, Iraq or Syria, and there are partners in the region that can counter the narratives that still exist. While we talk about Ukraine, everyone seems to forget that ISIS still exists. It has not gone anywhere, and we owe it to our partners in the region to work alongside them and to build up capability where they could do slightly better.

Israel and Palestine is a slightly separate conversation in which the US has clearly led for many years, and we have played at the edges. In the book I made the point that I am afraid there is very little we can do to change that direction. Sometimes, as Great Britain, we think it is 1946 or 1947. It is not, and we walked back from that topic post the independence of the State of Israel, and definitely after 1956. I am not sure that we should be measuring the success of global Britain through our ability to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It would be very damaging to us. It was damaging to Bill Clinton—do not forget that—and that was at the zenith of US power.

I am not saying that we should not care, or that human rights should not be at the forefront of our mind in these countries. I want to go on record and say that I thought the Foreign Secretary's response at the Foreign Affairs Committee, when she was asked what conversations about human rights she was conducting with states in the region, was wholly unacceptable. Wholly unacceptable. You must be able to elucidate the concerns that you have with states—regardless of whether you are left wing or right wing, utilitarian or emotional—where there is considerable public interest in them behaving more according to the norms that we would expect.

Lord Teverson: Thanks very much. My father served in the Middle East in 1947 and would agree with you entirely that we needed to get out at that time.

The Chair: Thank you. Time is our enemy, and I invite Lord Anderson to ask the final question. There will not be time for a supplementary question.

Q99 **Lord Anderson of Swansea:** Gentlemen, the tilt to the Indo-Pacific and the reduced focus on the Middle East has relevance for capabilities. For example, does the defence Command Paper's renewed emphasis on firepower and advanced technology for the Army come at the expense of forces that are highly relevant to the Middle East, such as counterinsurgency, stabilisation missions, training and so on?

Professor Alessio Patalano: My cards are on the table. The Indo-Pacific is predominantly maritime-centric, so it demands an expeditionary outlook that, as a result, needs to be agile, mobile and maritime-based with the support of air power and relatively light formations of the Army. That is not the type of configuration that we were looking at in previous defence reviews. From my perspective, the defence Command Paper is absolutely spot on. The question is not whether you need more armoured brigades but what kind of British contribution to European stability is suitable for the UK. This Government have quite correctly decided to play to the UK's asymmetries in providing support to allies on the continent when it comes to the heavy lifting, and focusing on using maritime as the launch pad through which you exert influence.

I want to go back to a point that Michael raised, which is absolutely right, on the question of capabilities. To an extent, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, how you focus the use of your capabilities is even more important and it demands a maritime shift that has been absent. I will give you an example. CSG was mentioned. CSG21 was an incredible success. Absolutely. Do you need to do it regularly? I do not think so, not if you give me a Type 31 that is forward-deployed and committed to participating in the key multilateral exercises that are essential to create interoperability and interchangeability, such as RIMPAC, Talisman or Malabar.

On the point that Michael made earlier about defence engagement and our activities, they are okay, but we need to identify which of them really matters in order to reassure our partners and create effective military capacity. That is essential. In that sense, the shift of mentality away from the counterinsurgencies, that we are going to sort a problem somewhere in the middle of nowhere, does not necessarily best serve the type of geopolitical context in which we live, whereby most of our prosperity depends on shipping and underwater sea cables.

We live in a maritime century and therefore Britain's national security will be best served by the defence posture broadly laid out in the Command Paper and the Integrated Review, which is maritime and forward-operating. In that sense, the key element becomes the point that Michael was making, which is as true for the Indo-Pacific as it is for the Middle East, and is about focusing on the one hand on key partnerships and alliances that deliver across the spectrum of integration with others, and on the other, a command structure that allows us to operate in a forward fashion to maximise whatever capabilities are available on the day.

Michael Stephens: My immediate answer is that I do not see an immediate threat to our force posture in the Middle East from the Indo-Pacific tilt. In some ways—Alessio alluded to this—it complements it. On the investments that have been made in Oman, you do not build a whacking great training facility and then conduct regular training with the Omani air, land and sea forces if you are planning on pulling away any time soon or saying to the Omanis, "We're going out to the Indo-Pacific. You are less important to us". Those investments have been made.

Defence engagement is a well-trodden and well-understood pathway that needs no reassessment when it comes to the Gulf states.

However, there is always, and there has been since the mujaheddin in Afghanistan, a tendency to look at a national security threat that emanates from a weak state, think that it is done once you have poured in capacity, pull it back out, and five years later find that actually it was creating a secondary problem that became even bigger than the first. That could lead to some problems down the road. At the moment, we tend to think state on state and geopolitically, and, as we have discussed at length, the Middle East is not really seen as an area where state-on-state conflict is that likely; it used to be, but it is not that likely. It tends to be non-state actors and counterinsurgency operations.

The good thing about counterinsurgency operations as they exist today—if there is a good thing—is that they are relatively light-print. You do not have to put thousands of men on the ground as we did in 2003 to keep a relatively well-staffed, forward-operating base on the Iraq-Syria border that can keep ISIS in check and that has good command and control coming from Qatar, Erbil or maybe even as far out as Akrotiri. I do not see the ability to ramp up with specialist capabilities affected by an increased presence in south-east Asia, AUKUS or any of these things. The threat is more of a political one, more of an appetite one. That is why, even though Afghanistan is not in the Middle East, I paid very close attention.

To my mind, two things were clear. First, people were getting bored, and, secondly, when people got bored, the proverbial hit the fan and everybody suddenly thought they could change things as though it was 2003 once again. That is not going to happen. There is no appetite from France, the UK or the US to go storming into the region in large numbers to solve a problem. That period is over. In a paper written before he became National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan made that very clear. We have absorbed and understood that and, as a result, our force posture has been adapted to it and we have played a complementary role in areas of high security next to the United States and some other allies, in particular the French.

In our geostrategic ideas, I go back to the previous question. Our interests predated United States interests in the region, and they will outlast them. I often say that when I go to Washington. My view is that we will continue to see value in our defence relationships and engagements in the region for a longer period than the US will.

The Chair: Thank you very much indeed for assisting us this morning. The way in which you are able to range over the issues that interconnect the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East and our relationship with our allies across the pond has been enormously helpful. Thank you very much indeed.