



Select Committee on International Relations and Defence

Corrected oral evidence: The UK and Afghanistan

Wednesday 21 October 2020

11 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Baroness Anelay of St Johns (The Chair); Lord Alton of Liverpool; Baroness Blackstone; Baroness Fall; Lord Grocott; Lord Hannay of Chiswick; Baroness Helic; Lord Mendelsohn; Lord Purvis of Tweed; Baroness Rawlings; Lord Reid of Cardowan; Baroness Smith of Newnham.

Evidence Session No. 10

Virtual Proceedings

Questions 85 - 91

Witnesses

I: Lord Houghton of Richmond GCB CBE DL; Lord Mark Sedwill KCMG FRGS, former Cabinet Secretary and former National Security Adviser.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witnesses

Lord Houghton of Richmond and Lord Sedwill.

Q85 **The Chair:** This is our second session today on the UK and Afghanistan. I welcome Lord Houghton of Richmond, the former Chief of the Defence Staff, and Lord Sedwill, former Cabinet Secretary, former National Security Adviser, former ambassador to Afghanistan and former NATO senior civilian representative in Afghanistan.

Lord Sedwill has the advantage of chairing the Atlantic Future Forum right now. I believe it started its sessions yesterday, and it is being held aboard the carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth. I had the opportunity to see it from land a year ago when I was in Portsmouth, and all I can say is that when they say it is big, it is big. I thank him for taking time out from that to join us.

At this stage, I always make the point that the session we are having is broadcast, transcribed and on the record. I advise both witnesses and my colleagues that in either asking or answering questions, if there are relevant interests to be declared—in the case of the witnesses, I have not already mentioned this—they should do so.

Thank you very much to both our witnesses for sharing your expertise today in our inquiry. As usual, I will start by asking a very general question, and then I shall turn to my colleagues to ask more detailed questions.

Starting with the general question, how would you define the UK's national security and foreign policy interests in Afghanistan? I would like to start with Lord Houghton on this occasion, but I will try to alternate between the two of you so that you are not always the second person answering.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: Thank you. It is nice to be able to speak ahead of Mark; that is great. I thank the Committee for the invitation to give evidence to the inquiry. I do so in part out of a strong sense of residual duty to support such inquiries into our most recent involvement in Afghanistan. I am mindful, having seen some of the questions, that I am not absolutely up to date with the detail of some of them, but I will do my best to give you the best that I can on policy context and background, which goes straight to this first question.

Perhaps I might start with an unconventional approach to answering. The most significant factors that influenced our physical and resource commitment to Afghanistan in the period since the start of 2015 and the Resolute Support mission, but also in the year prior to that, have probably been more to do with things external to Afghanistan than inside it.

I would say that those external factors are the political recognition at that time, 2014, of both the domestic unpopularity and practical unsustainability in human resource terms of an enduring combat mission, balanced by the need, almost a moral imperative, that was felt to

continue to justify the engagement and the sacrifice already made. There was definitely a need to continue to play, and to be seen to play, a leadership role within the international community, particularly within NATO. Then, I think, there was also a strong need to sustain a narrative, both domestically and internationally, of progress and success. So there was an overall need to justify the overall endeavour.

Those issues frame the external context. The internal context consisted of a recognition that the security situation remained very fragile. The Afghan security institutions, although formally in security leadership, continued to need significant support. There was an absolute recognition that there had been no internal resolution of the political fractures in Afghanistan. Principally, that is between the government and the Taliban but also within the government themselves, who were an aggregation of many fractured parts.

There was therefore a continuing fear that an ungoverned and unsecured country could once again become a safe haven for international terrorism, and particularly, about that time, the potential for ISIS, maybe in the format of ISKP,¹ to undermine the original and enduring purpose of the whole enterprise—in fact, to me, the only thing that supports a truly satisfactory narrative—of ensuring that Afghanistan would never again be a safe haven for terrorism.

To the internal conflicts, I would add the wholly proper recognition of the need to help to sustain the important humanitarian development progress that had been achieved.

I shall pause there, but often we think of the factors that affect our interests as being internal to Afghanistan, but there were a whole raft of external considerations that set the parameters within which we then defined the way in which we met our internal interests.

Lord Sedwill: Like Nick Houghton, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to join you. This is my first appearance before a select committee since becoming a Peer—although I have not yet been introduced to the House—and on a topic that, like Nick Houghton, I have not been involved in directly in recent years but about which, for obvious reasons, I feel very strongly. I am very happy and flattered to have the opportunity to contribute to your inquiry and I will do my best to answer your questions.

On the first question, for brevity's sake, there is very little for me to add to what Nick Houghton just set out. Fundamentally, the reason we went into Afghanistan in the first place is the reason we remain engaged: the national security threats that spill out of failed or even fragile states affect us at home and affect our allies—notably, as he said, terrorism.

Of course, we also need to keep in mind serious and organised crime; Afghanistan certainly was, although I do not know whether it still is, the

¹ Islamic State Khorosan Province

source of most of the heroin on British streets, and that kills more people every year than terrorism does. Lord Reid will recall from his time as Home Secretary the pernicious effects of that, so we cannot ignore the chronic as well as the acute problems such as terrorism.

Instability in Afghanistan affects a volatile region. Over centuries, certainly over many years, Afghanistan has been a theatre in which regional rivalries have played out, neighbours have meddled and instability in Afghanistan risks spilling out into a volatile region. The border areas of Pakistan, for example, are also Talibanised, and if the Pakistani Taliban have safe havens in Afghanistan, that poses significant security problems, just as we have always been worried about the Afghan Taliban having safe havens in those parts of Pakistan. None of us can afford to see Pakistan destabilised, for all the obvious reasons.

The stability of Afghanistan is the only basis on which we can be confident of having the institutions in place—including our own, but preferably Afghan—to deal with those threats of terrorism, serious and organised crime and regional instability. As Lord Houghton also pointed out, we in this country have always had a humanitarian imperative, and Afghanistan is among the poorest places in the world. We must not neglect, let alone lose, the progress that has been made in education—getting girls into education—in healthcare outcomes and in life expectancy, just as we would aim not to do so elsewhere.

At the second layer, though, I think it is in our national security interest partly because of the stamina, if you like, of the Western alliance—or the fact that that stamina started to erode five to 10 years ago—but also because an external military presence in any country inevitably becomes part of the problem the longer it endures. In my view, there came a tipping point, probably around the time when I was there or just beforehand, when, at least in parts of Afghanistan, the external military presence was a contributor to tensions and internal conflict while also being the key capability to try to deal with it.

That is why we had to develop and then implement the transition programme: essentially, to hand over responsibility to Afghan forces—they were the ones on the ground, in their own communities—to try to take out some of the tension that was generated by the highly intrusive presence, as it would be in any country, of foreign forces.

A big part of our national security interest is not just stabilising Afghanistan, but enabling the Afghans to stabilise Afghanistan for themselves, because that is the only enduring model in which we can be confident. However, that requires, at least for the foreseeable future—as it has for the past few years—underwriting by external financial, military and developmental support, and support for other kinds of capabilities.

I should probably leave it there, because I imagine we will explore one or two of those points in further questions.

The Chair: Thank you both for that opening analysis, which provides a

really helpful background to the questions that will follow. I now turn to our first detailed question, which will come from Baroness Blackstone.

Q86 Baroness Blackstone: Good morning. I am sorry that you cannot see me, because I have a technical problem, but I can see all of you.

How would you assess the UK's engagement with Afghanistan over the past 10 years? I would like you to focus particularly on the period since 2014, and tell us what you think the greatest successes and shortcomings to our engagement have been.

Lord Sedwill: I will just repeat my health warning from earlier. I am speaking as an interested outsider, who is not as directly involved as I was before 2014, the period you focus on. When I was National Security Adviser, I had some overall responsibility for this, but I was not as directly involved in Afghanistan in the way I have been hitherto.

In exploring this question, it is important to remember that the UK was operating as part of an alliance and wider coalition in Afghanistan. Therefore, our independent track record of successes and otherwise during that period was entirely bound up with the American position and that of our allies and partners.

To point to individual issues, and Nick Houghton may be able to speak more about this, the training mission which the UK led—in particular, the officer academy based in Kabul, which was essentially designed to be a Sandhurst in Afghanistan—has proved to be a considerable tactical success, in that it has trained and improved the leadership capability of a generation of Afghan national defence and security force officers, who would not otherwise have had that kind of training and professionalism. Everyone who has been involved in that facility has been impressed not only by its professionalism, because we know our forces are highly professional, but by its cultural sensitivity and the way it was able to train in the Afghan context. We did not try to impose some kind of purely western NATO-like model but sought a way that accorded to Afghan cultural norms and the capabilities and pressures within the Afghan forces. Lord Houghton will be able to say more about that, since he is of course a much greater military expert than me, but it was an important tactical success.

The development programme has also been important. There was a humanitarian element to that, as Afghanistan has faced various natural setbacks, as well as support for healthcare and education. We have probably also been the leading nation trying to tackle the drugs problem in Afghanistan over the entire decade. That has obviously had mixed results; far too much of the Afghan economy remains dominated by narcotics, but we have built capability in the Afghan government to tackle that set of issues, including in specialist forces and various task forces, which are operating under the Ministry of Interior Affairs.

All those are essentially tactical successes against the background of an overall engagement that has been up and down. As many predicted, Afghanistan has not collapsed into instability. Many said that it would do

in 2014, but I always felt that it was more resilient. It has managed to continue and, I suspect, will still prove more resilient, but it still has very challenging problems—corruption, poor governance, lack of a political settlement, et cetera.

I am sure we will explore those issues further and I am happy to talk about them more, if that is helpful.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: It might be helpful if I dwell on the shift in our policy, and therefore success, at the end of the ISAF mission² in 2014 and the beginning of the Resolute Support Mission in 2015. I think everybody would admit that the period when the UK focus was down in Helmand was quite torrid and attritional. Nobody really enjoyed it, and nor were its potential outcomes remotely decisive.

However, there was a significant policy change in 2014-15 to a commitment based on support for, not ownership of, Afghans' future. It was therefore a commitment at far less cost and UK national risk, but with a lot less certainty and control of the outcomes because, quite rightly, Afghanistan was put in charge of its own future.

To speak from a military perspective, from then on the UK became what we would term an economy-of-force operation, in which you still wish to achieve your aims but are not prepared to commit the same resources, partly because the implications of failure are not as great and partly because other priorities demand attention. When one embarks on an inquiry into a specific subject, as with Afghanistan, one can sometimes lose an understanding of the degree to which it became a lesser security priority at that time, when other things—Russian malevolence, the growth of ISIS and all that—were taking far more attention.

The most significant military success in the period from early 2014 was the remarkable military pivot from, as I say, a somewhat attritional, unrewarding, very costly and only marginally beneficial engagement with the Taliban in Helmand province to, I suggest, a cleverly conceived, high-profile, high-utility, relatively low-risk and low-budget commitment in Kabul. Those were the political design parameters placed on us, and I was CDS at the time, so I knew them personally. In detail, I refer to the position the UK took in the Kabul protection and quick reaction force—which was a very high-profile and, to give tribute to the Government, still quite a risky enterprise—our role in running the officer academy, which was the 'Sandhurst in the sand' to which Mark has referred, and our high-level mentorship roles with the Afghan security ministries.

To go back, if I could exploit this inquiry, in a way, I am not certain that there has been sufficient public understanding or appreciation of the remarkably successful extraction from the combat phase of operations which UK troops managed to execute. As a bit of military detail, the most challenging operations in warfare are not the static ones, like positional

² The International Security Assistance Force mission.

defence; they are what we call transitional phases—advance to contact or withdraw in contact—and this was a withdrawal in contact.

In such phases, the deployed forces are extremely vulnerable to ambush, rout or humiliation. There was an awful lot of political and military anxiety about whether or not we could effect this in the way that we subsequently did. But our withdrawal was effected in good order, without casualties of extraction at the time and, dare I say it, in a way that was wholly compliant with both the NAO and HM Treasury. The degree to which there was oversight of what could be sold, disposed of and gifted was a remarkably bureaucratic and logistical enterprise. All I am saying is that it was no small feat.

More widely on successes, however, I would stress the point in shifting quite a lot of the emphasis towards humanitarian support, development activity, Afghan institutional capacity building and, most importantly, political reconciliation. The period up to 2014 was very much defined by the military commitment to Helmand, which was never of itself going to bring about a resolution of Afghanistan's problems, but the period since then—this has taken some time and will take some time to come—is all about being able to set up Afghanistan as a more advanced country in humanitarian terms, a far more reliant country in security terms and, hopefully, depending on how the peace process goes, a slightly more united country in political terms. Again, I will pause there.

Q87 Baroness Fall: My question focuses on the security challenges for the Afghan state as we see it today. You have both touched on some of these issues in your opening remarks. What do you feel is the extent of its domestic issues—you have talked about drugs and the Taliban; its issues in relation to agendas from other countries—you have spoken about powerplay in the region; and, finally, its issues in relation to organisations such as al-Qaeda? I am focusing in particular on some of your remarks about whether we are going full circle and establishing a country that is a safe haven for terrorism.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I will leave some of the issues of external powerplay and the politics in the region to Mark.

It is the domestic security dimension that is perhaps the prevalent one. I have a simple sense that the enduring security challenges, the ones that will have the greatest impact on everyday lives, will be the inevitability of the re-establishment of localised power throughout Afghanistan as opposed to centralised authority, and localised power in the hands of local power brokers, who I fear will in turn have fingers in the pies of drugs, corruption, extortion, violence and politics. It is inherently a decentralised country that is difficult to run, and to an extent we have attempted to impose something of a centralised model on it.

However the reconciliation and peace process goes, I think there is an inevitability about a return to power and authority being more dispersed throughout the country, some of it in the hands of fairly malevolent characters. That is inevitably how the country will settle back down. I do

not describe that as a failure or a full cycle back to where we started, but I think there is an inevitability of acceptance of that more devolved model.

I think much depends on the outcome of the current peace process and the degree to which the Taliban can be fully brought into it. You may have further questions on this, I do not know, but there is much to be encouraged by the process thus far, however frustrating it is, because it at least starts to employ the currency of ceasefires, troop withdrawals, prisoner releases, technical talks and women's rights.

However, there are also some fairly incalculable risks about the extent to which renewed Taliban violence will accompany the peace process. There are certainly some early signs that that will be the case. ANSF³ competence has to play into that. I am not an expert on ISKP, but it also looks like a potential spoiler, as, dare I say it, might US miscalculations regarding troop levels and their withdrawal.

Having said all that, I think Afghan society is exhausted by the war and the main protagonists want resolution, but it would be a brave man who suggested that political and ideological reconciliation will be swift, violence-free or relatively smooth and sustainable. I will pause there, perhaps.

Lord Sedwill: This question goes to the crux of the whole question of Afghanistan over the next few years. Although, Baroness Fall, you are asking about the current situation, it is perhaps worth looking back at why we are where we are.

Partly because of the way we analyse problems, we tend to look at Afghanistan through the labels of ideological conflict, so the Taliban are associated with al Qaeda and so on. We sometimes think of these as political movements in the western sense, but they really are not. They have an element of that to them, of course, with their particularly radical conservative Islamic ideology, but most of Afghan society is highly conservative in its cultural norms. Even the parts of Afghan society that are strongly in favour of women's education and so on are in other ways highly conservative in their religious and cultural norms.

We tend to oversimplify these things from an external perspective because, frankly, it is easier for us to think in those terms. Actually, the Taliban is primarily a Pashtun tribal phenomenon in Afghanistan. This is oversimplifying just for brevity, but essentially there are two big tribal federations within the Pashtun ethnic group in Afghanistan. First, there are the Durrani, who are associated with the royal family and have traditionally provided the ruling class in Kabul—there has always been a tension between centralisation and the centrifugal tendencies in Afghanistan, which Lord Houghton just referred to—and the Karzai government were essentially from that federation. Secondly, there are

³ The Afghan National Security Force

the Ghilzais, from whom the Taliban drew most of their strength when in power.

So sometimes it is profitable to look at the country in the way our predecessors of 150 years ago might have looked at it. Rather than looking at it through an ideological lens, although that has some power, we should be looking at it through the tribal lens and asking, "To what extent can we explain this tension between the Ghilzais and the Durrani?"

The Ghilzais were underrepresented in the immediate post-2001 period because they had been the support base of the Taliban. The Taliban essentially managed to restart the civil war in Afghanistan in the mid-2000s because of resentment among the Ghilzai-affiliated tribes that they did not have access to political power, patronage, resources and so on, and indeed because some of the Western intervention was providing resources to their tribal rivals. If you are a tribal leader, and the Kabul government, supported by the West, give money, guns and uniforms and have called someone a police chief whom you simply regard as a tribal rival, it is unsurprising that you will affiliate yourself with the Taliban as the main alternative power source. That was part of the story in Helmand and certainly part of the story across large parts of southern Afghanistan.

So, in answer to your question, much of the current situation depends on whether, as Nick has just set out, the internal Afghan political settlement enables all those different tribal groups to feel that they have essentially a fair share of access to resources, control over their local areas and so on.

Much of the peace process, although we think of it as happening between two organised groups in a similar way to how groups have acted in western Europe, is much more complex. So in a sense I am less worried about al Qaeda reviving, because I think the external Afghan leadership and the tribal leaders from whom they draw their strength in the south can actually contain that problem if they are willing to do so, because they have close association with al Qaeda and that can be part of an agreement. Of course, one of the most challenging issues with any political deal in Afghanistan is not striking it, hard though that is, but enforcing it thereafter. Again, we might want to return to that. However, ISKP, the ISIS affiliate, is operating almost wholly independently and is also a threat to them—indeed, we have seen the conflict between them, too—exploiting some of the gaps that inevitably arise in a fractured society like Afghanistan.

Some of the really hard questions for us are about the fact that access to power and resources in Afghanistan also means access to the resources of the narcotics trade. There are many fellow travellers with the Taliban in Afghanistan who use that as a flag of convenience, partly to motivate their followers and partly to give themselves respectability, but largely because they are local warlords determined to retain control of areas, resources and indeed the drugs trade in their area.

Therefore, the big security challenge in Afghanistan is how one tackles that patchwork of local interests. I think Nick Houghton is right: there will have to be a balance, but there will be a tension as well as balance between the centre and the localities.

One of the key issues is the way in which the Afghan national forces exercise their authority. They must be national. That authority must not be exercised through favouring local power brokers of one kind or another, as it often was. Actually, that happened particularly in the police, not the army, to be fair. The army was genuinely pretty national—it was quite careful not to put troops into an area to secure it who were from the same area—but the police forces were not; they were local, and therefore they were inevitably caught up in local tribal tensions. So for any settlement to endure, they will have to manage the essentially political nature of the Afghan security forces on the ground.

In answer to your second question about their ability to handle external pressures—I will be briefer on this—those have shifted over the years but much of it is the same: the key external actors since 9/11 have been NATO, led by the US, and Pakistan, and several others such as the Gulf powers, but Russia, India, and China have probably been the other key players there. Iran has an influence in parts of Afghanistan as well and has probably had more influence in some of the electoral politics of Afghanistan than any other external player.

What has changed in the last five years is that Chinese influence has increased. It has become more active, and part of that is driven by its interest in Afghanistan's raw materials and almost entirely unexploited natural resources; when I was there, the US Geological Survey identified them, demonstrating that Afghanistan was actually a very wealthy country. The risk in the current situation, of course, is that that underlying natural resource wealth becomes a cause of conflict rather than the means for Afghanistan to become genuinely self-sufficient over a period as its economy develops.

That is why the security question and the related political question are so important, because we do not want to see the same kind of struggle over mineral resources that we have seen over narcotics or simply local control, otherwise this terrible saga will just continue and al Qaeda, ISKP or other organisations of that kind will simply exploit the gaps, whether or not they have the tacit or explicit blessing of the government in Kabul—whoever is in government at the time.

Q88 Lord Mendelsohn: Thank you both for this very helpful and clear evidence.

I wanted to try to gather your thoughts on NATO, building in a sense on Lord Sedwill's comments about stamina starting to erode over a period of time and Lord Houghton's comments about addressing the external actors and how that needed to change with the missions.

What is your assessment of co-operation within NATO on Afghanistan? How well did NATO find the mechanisms to work well together? How

unified has the Alliance been, and how has that changed since the completion of the mission of the International Security Assistance Force in 2014 and in Resolute Support? What do you think NATO has learned from the deployment in Afghanistan?

Lord Sedwill: Thank you, Lord Mendelsohn; that is a great question, if I may say so.

To your first point, I will put this in slightly caricatured terms, but I think it will make the point. We hit upon the right strategy in Afghanistan as our patience started to run out. It was right to move from essentially war fighting as the primary mission—that was the IJC, the joint command in Afghanistan—to building the capability of the Afghan security forces so that they could take on that function themselves and enable us to be less prominent in the establishment of the Afghan training mission in Afghanistan, which happened when I was there as ambassador and NATO representative.

To go to your very last point about the lessons that we have learned, for me the key lesson, at least for the military, is that building indigenous capability should have been the central effort from the start, and the combat mission should always have been regarded as essentially a bridging operation to provide the space and security to enable it to happen. The transition to Afghan responsibility should always have been the primary mission, as opposed to thinking that we were going to do it ourselves, we were “in it to win it” and other phrases of that kind.

If we find ourselves in similar counterinsurgency operations in future, I hope that is the key lesson. Look at the operation in Somalia, which we support, led by the African Union and AMISOM forces: they have applied, explicitly or not, some of those techniques with some measure of success. Of course, they use more local intervention forces as well, which creates fewer antibodies in the culture of the country concerned.

One of the reasons why this has proved so challenging is that we started setting deadlines for ourselves around that time, 2010-11, even as the huge ISAF surge was coming in to enable us to try to break the momentum of the insurgency, regain the initiative ourselves and create the space for that mission to rebuild the Afghan forces, which was always going to take several years. We started setting deadlines for ourselves about withdrawal. That was responding to the perfectly natural political imperatives in Western countries, but of course led by the US. It led to the Taliban phrase, “You have the watches, we have the time”, and there is a lot of power in that critique.

It was a mistake to set deadlines of that kind explicitly, even as we always knew that it was politically unrealistic not to be on a trajectory to withdrawing our forces. I always felt that transition to Afghan control gave us the route out, but it would have been better had it always been clearly conditions-based rather than time-based.

I hope that is one of the lessons that we can still learn for Afghanistan, as well as if NATO ever operates in these circumstances again. You have to mean it when you say that it is conditions-based, otherwise you simply leave the initiative with the protagonists.

I think NATO unity was one of the positives of the Afghan campaign. Germany, for example, is still the second-biggest troop contributor to Afghanistan and has been from 2014 onwards, I think, but certainly for several years. It has about 1,300 troops there now or something of that kind, but significantly more than us. We are number three now; we were number two throughout the ISAF mission. But this was Germany's first combat mission, certainly of that scale but really of any kind, since World War II. It took a lot of responsibility in the north while we were in Helmand. It recognised, even though it did not perceive an acute national security threat to Germany, that being a good ally in this era meant participating in a significant way in Afghanistan.

When I was there, we lost two countries from the coalition but gained four or five others. The NATO-led ISAF coalition was up to 50 countries when I left. Many of the smaller contributions were largely symbolic in military terms. They provided some useful capability, but they were there to demonstrate political unity behind the mission. The NATO unity of purpose held up well.

In terms of practicalities, however, NATO is a military alliance, so the military command structure worked very well. There were too many national caveats. One NATO commander joked that he was in charge of 46 tribes, when the Afghans had around the same number. I sort of understood what he meant, because the American commanders always had to wrestle with lots of national caveats and constraints. We always sought to be the best ally that we could be, but, fundamentally, the military command structure in NATO demonstrated its effectiveness throughout.

The experience all those forces had of operating under someone else's command proved very powerful. When Nick Carter, the current Chief of the Defence Staff, was the ISAF commander in RC South, he was the first British general to command substantial American forces in combat operations since I think World War II—Lord Houghton will correct me if I am wrong—or maybe since Korea, but certainly for a very long time. He commanded significant American forces during that period, because of an integrated NATO military command structure.

On the civilian side, my job was to try to create something close to that unity of purpose—I could not create unity of command, as civilian structures do not work that way—among the civilian side, the provincial reconstruction teams, the diplomatic effort and so on, which the American generals led on the military side. That was a significant diplomatic effort. There were some who thought it had nothing to do with us and that national imperatives should prevail, but we managed to secure political engagement from the NATO alliance and the wider ISAF coalition to the transition approach, to it being led by NATO, to the

civilianisation of certain responsibilities and the Afghanisation of those responsibilities. It took a lot of effort, but that transition worked smoothly from 2010, when we devised it—we started implementing in 2011—to 2014 and beyond. NATO commitment stabilised thereafter.

To come back to your final question and then I will finish, this is another lesson for NATO. We should not learn lessons only from the things that we could have done better, but from the things that we improvised and did quite well. If NATO were ever to be involved in an operation of this kind again, it would need to create—just as we had in the Balkans when Paddy Ashdown was there—the same coherence from the start around the civilian and political efforts which the NATO military command structure naturally brings to the military effort, whoever is in charge at the top level, whether a political leadership or whatever.

That should have been designed from the start, rather than improvised several years in. If NATO were doing this again, I would recommend the alliance taking that approach. If it is a different configuration and just a coalition of the willing using NATO structures, it should apply some of those techniques. I hope that helps.

The Chair: Is there anything you would like to add to that, Lord Houghton?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: Mark has sort of eaten the sandwiches and shot the fox, and he has done it brilliantly. I absolutely get the point that NATO failed to co-ordinate the ISAF part of this as well as it should have, by dint of there being so many national contributions of blood and treasure. To take our experience, Whitehall tried to run Helmand almost as an independent operation. It was a number of loosely associated national efforts, but it definitely got better as time went on. The Resolute Support Mission did not have the same degree of blood and treasure. It was a training and support mission, by and large, so it was much easier for the NATO co-ordination to click in.

I take the point that the integration of the civilian development effort also tended to be run along national, rather than coherent international, lines. Again, that is now better in the Resolute Support Mission phase.

In a bizarre way, and certainly over the last decade, Afghanistan has acted as a unifying force within NATO and has assisted NATO's coherence. My experience over the last few years of going to NATO military committees and those sorts of things is that, for a decade, we had a potential schism within NATO between the threat of a resurgent Russia and what that means to people geographically proximate to it, and the threat of international terrorism from ISIS, the Mediterranean basin, north Africa and all that.

There has been a potential schism about NATO's most important mission. In many respects, the continuation of the Afghan mission, to which virtually every NATO country contributes an element, has enabled all contributing nations to pay their insurance premiums on the higher

national threat. In a way, NATO has been internally coerced into a high level of co-operation in the context of the Afghan commitment, which might not have otherwise featured on the list of many countries' national priorities. That has been a sort of balm to help people co-operate on prioritising the more strategic threats that NATO has felt more proximate over the last decade. I hope that makes sense to you. In many ways, it has enhanced the value of smaller nations, and has helped them to feel as if they are better NATO contributors and, therefore, more deserving of the aggregated power that NATO provides.

Q89 Lord Alton of Liverpool: I would like to move the argument on to military training of the Afghan forces. Our guests have described the very fragile gains that were won by brave lives, and Lord Houghton just described the expenditure of blood and treasure in making those gains. How are we going to sustain them in the future? To use Lord Sedwill's phrase, how will indigenous capability be developed by ensuring that the training and effectiveness of NATO's mission for the Afghan national security forces is realistic and sustainable?

You have just mentioned the contribution that others can make. You referred to smaller nations and the German contribution before, but what further international support could be given to make the Afghan forces, both police and military, a success in the future?

Lord Sedwill: I will be brief because this is Lord Houghton's specialist subject rather than mine. The key point for me is that it must be enduring until the Afghan forces have sufficient capability to deal with the various security threats themselves from their own resources. You mentioned the sacrifices, Lord Alton. We must acknowledge that the casualty rate that the Afghan forces have taken, without giving up, is significant. Lord Houghton may know some of the numbers, but they take an awful lot of casualties and they keep going. These are tough fighters and they do not need an awful lot of external support in the basic ground operations of counterinsurgency missions. They know how to do that; Afghans have been doing that very successfully for a very long time—centuries, one could argue.

Where they have really needed support is in leadership, which is partly why we chose to do 'Sandhurst in the sand', as Nick Houghton mentioned earlier, but also some of the more specialist capabilities such as air power, medical and so on—he may be able to say more about that—which take longer to develop in a force that was essentially dismantled.

A key point for me is that the international community needs to demonstrate the enduring commitment to build that capability, because that is a key asset for the legitimate Afghan political forces in any peace negotiation. The Taliban, the insurgents, need to know that they cannot take military ascendancy for granted once we step away.

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I will start with the blunt admission that multinational training programmes, provided by NATO or whatever other multinational institution, delivered by mixed national groupings in a

second language to students being taught in a foreign language by instructors of wildly differing competences, are definitely not the optimum methodology to achieve great training. I am always deeply suspicious of colour-coded metrics, based on input measurements of money and kit, that attempt to represent how good a fighting force is. I am afraid that much of what politicians get fed in this area does not really pass muster with me.

I would say, and Mark hinted at this, that all militaries have some similarities. Soldiers by and large serve to escape, to enjoy, to bond or simply to survive and provide. They are the physical component of fighting power. The Afghan physical component is pretty robust: they naturally make quite good soldiers.

By comparison, the officers provide what in the UK doctrine and terminology we call the moral and conceptual components. That is where most can be achieved, which is why I think 'Sandhurst in the sand' is such a good idea. The training of leaders and the establishment of the moral and conceptual ways in which a state should employ lethal force is one of the best ways for us to accelerate the national development of effective security forces.

Below that level, there needs to be a sort of international guarantee that some of the functional capabilities that take longer to build—helicopter capability, CASEVAC⁴ capability, medical capability, logistical capability, the maintenance of vehicles, those sorts of things—are underpinning things that are naturally learned by tribesmen soldier warriors. That is where we have to continue to contribute and support over time. I will leave it at that in the interests of time.

The Chair: In the interests of time, I suggest that the last two questions are asked at the same time and answered together. That means that Lord Grocott and Lord Purvis will ask their questions sequentially.

Q90 **Lord Grocott:** The question is straightforward, but I am not sure the answer is. It is about the consequences of the US decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. What are the implications of that in NATO as far as Britain is concerned? How might or should we respond? Perhaps you could also say something about the implications for counterterrorism support and what part we might play in that.

Q91 **Lord Purvis of Tweed:** Unfortunately, these are not really connected questions, but we will ask them together for the purposes of time—and happy birthday, Lord Sedwill.

In advance of your attending today, I looked at the national security capability review, which has only one reference to Afghanistan, on page 33: "We remain committed to Afghanistan's future". That is in stark contrast to the many references in the previous national security strategy, which is probably down to the shift that was very clearly explained by Lord Houghton.

⁴ Casualty evacuation

My question is about the link that there has been between the military and security side with the diplomatic and the development side. The Integrated Review is coming up. If we wanted to have a clear UK position on Afghanistan in future, building on our experience and linking together all the different components of security, diplomacy and development, what should we be looking for in the Integrated Review relating to Afghanistan?

Lord Houghton of Richmond: I appreciate that we only really have a minute or so each. On the implications of US troop withdrawal, my personal jury is out because I am not certain about it. I know that America still has sufficient troops committed for it to withdraw some, if you like for reasons of domestic politics, signalling or whatever.

There are two things that the Americans have to be very careful of. First, troop withdrawals are an element of leverage in any peace process and need to be harmonised with the progress of that process. Secondly, elements of US capability are what I would call critical to the avoidance of a potential catastrophic failure of ANSF, not across the board but maybe in a specific engagement or region. I do not for the life of me think that the US will do something reckless, but a miscalculation of its withdrawal, enduring support and the mechanisms of the peace process should be the things primarily against which they judge them, or else there could be a significant setback.

I am not certain about the degree to which the Integrated Review will bring out any specifics about the nature of Afghanistan, the commitment or whatever. It should not; it should be more generic in the way it expresses, dare I say it, the concept of use of military force in the nature of the security context in which we live. However, I do not think it could help but suggest that Afghanistan is one of those places where stabilisation needs to be supported and contributed to for some significant time to come. The degree to which we contribute to that stabilisation and the methodology of it can then be the way in which that policy is put into practice. However, Afghanistan should still feature because of its current security context. I will leave it at that.

Lord Sedwill: I will be brief. In the famous political phrase, I agree with Nick. He is absolutely right about that. The Americans have said that they will withdraw, but we are in an election period there and, as Lord Houghton says, let us not assume that that means full withdrawal by Christmas, in the way that it has sometimes been interpreted. Like Nick Houghton, I do not believe that they will do something reckless, and it is important that there are conditions associated with a drawdown of troops. They can withdraw some without jeopardising the mission, but they need to retain troops in order to preserve the confidence as well as the capability of the Afghan forces, and for as long as they are there I would argue we should be there, too.

In terms of the wider mission, which Lord Houghton just referred to, the capability review and probably this Integrated Review are probably more internally focused on capabilities, as opposed to the uses to which those

capabilities must be put. I do not think one should overinterpret the relative number of sentences in a review of that kind as signalling more or less commitment.

Afghanistan is a theatre in which stabilisation and expeditionary capabilities need to continue to be deployed. Any political settlement in Afghanistan needs not just to be capable of being agreed; it must be regulated and enforced, otherwise it will unravel. As Nick said, that requires continuing military but also diplomatic and development commitment and financial commitments, but with a clear trajectory to enable the Afghans to take charge of their own destiny, exploit their mineral wealth for themselves and become self-sufficient in a manageable number of years. It is possible to put that together, but of course it is not entirely straightforward.

The Chair: On behalf of the Committee, thank you for enabling us to benefit from the depth and breadth of your expertise on the subject of Afghanistan and the relationships with UK policy, both now and as we look forward to the future. In closing this session, I remind my colleagues that we will meet again very shortly on Microsoft Teams to reflect on the valuable evidence that we have heard this morning. Lord Houghton and Lord Sedwill, thank you very much for your contributions today.