

Defence Committee

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

Tuesday 17 January 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 17 January 2023.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Sarah Atherton; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; Mr Kevan Jones; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; Gavin Robinson; John Spellar; Derek Twigg.

Questions 86-132

Witnesses

[I](#): Brigadier (ret.) Ben Barry, Senior Fellow, IISS and Veerle Nouwens, Senior Research Fellow, Asia-Pacific, RUSI.

[II](#): John Hemmings, Senior Director, Indo-Pacific Foreign and Security Policy, Pacific Forum and Seth Jones, Director, International Security Programme, CSIS.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Ben Barry and Veerle Nouwens.

Q86 Chair: Order. Welcome to this Defence Committee hearing on Tuesday 17 January 2023. We will be focusing on the Indo-Pacific here today, looking at the goals for the UK in the region and how achievable they are, particularly in relation to what is happening in Ukraine, the type of defence presence the UK should have there, and how we work in tandem with our allies. All of that will be in relation to what is happening here in Europe as well.

Our session will be divided into two panels. For the first, I am very pleased to welcome Veerle Nouwens, who is the senior research fellow on the Asia-Pacific at RUSI—welcome indeed—and Brigadier Ben Barry, who is a senior fellow at IISS. Thank you very much indeed for your time this morning.

Before we go into that, Brigadier, I wonder if I may just take advantage of your knowledge and expertise on land warfare capabilities. Some major announcements have been made, not just by Britain but by other nations, on gifting some serious hardware to Ukraine—one squadron. Could you perhaps give your reflections on our advance in perhaps being more confident in giving that equipment? Will it have a material impact, bearing in mind a spring offensive? Where does that leave our own combat effectiveness, given where we are with Warrior, Challenger, Boxer and Ajax?

Ben Barry: Thank you, Chair. Challenger 2 is a very respectable tank. It is an equal to the Leopard 2 and the Abrams, and, in many respects, it is superior to the Soviet-type tanks that both Ukraine and Russia have. It has a disadvantage, in that it is 20 tonnes heavier, which will increase the requirement for fuel, and Ukrainian engineers will be much busier making sure that they do not break up the roads. Shifting them into forward areas in Ukraine will also be quite a logistic undertaking, whether by rail or on tank transporters. The Ukrainians will find a single squadron of Challenger useful, but I do not think it will be decisive.

The Ukrainian leadership is quite clear that, in order to mount the strategic counter-offensive that they want to mount this year, they have asked for 300 tanks, 600 or 700 infantry fighting vehicles and another 500 Howitzers. That ties in with earlier statements that to mount that counter-offensive they need to raise between 10 and 20 extra heavy-armoured or mechanised brigades.

It is the political role that is significant. The UK is hoping that this will be a leading step that will unlock an apparent logjam in the supply of Leopard 2 tanks from European countries. Europe has more than 2,000 of those. It is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

a very capable tank, and it also uses the same ammunition as the US M1 Abrams.

We will see at the latest meeting of the contact group, which is coming up, whether Germany will authorise the export of those tanks to Ukraine. That is a political question for Chancellor Scholz and his Government, and for whoever his new Defence Minister is. We will wait and see. I think the Ukrainians will have found this useful, but it is the political impact that is going to be most important.

Q87 Chair: Turning to the UK defence posture, from the land warfare capability, we can now muster two regiments. We have cut back on an entire regiment. You commented on that. When the Challenger 2 came in, I think we were up to 900 tanks. Are we getting a bit thin on the ground when it comes to combat effectiveness?

Ben Barry: I was with the Army on Friday, with the 12th Armoured Brigade Combat Team. They told me that the Army currently still had three regiments: two in their brigade and one in 20 Brigade. Quite clearly, under current plans, that is due to go down to two regiments. It does mean that the British heavy division is very light in tanks. The war in Ukraine has thoroughly invalidated former Prime Minister Boris Johnson's statement that the days of tank battles on the European plains are over.

There is a lot we do not know about the war in Ukraine. Data is quite hard to come by, and we must remember that both Ukraine and Russia are busy shaping an information operation to suit them. From what I have seen, read and discussed, it is quite clear that there have been serious tank battles. For example, Anthony Loyd of *The Times* reported on a battalion-level tank battle in the Donbas over the summer. There is no better way to kill a tank or an armoured vehicle than a tank.

Q88 Chair: So, cutting back from 227 tanks to 148 is food for thought, perhaps, for the refresh of the integrated review?

Ben Barry: Yes, it is quite a risk. Armoured warfare, of course, is about more than tanks. It is about the full spectrum of combat support under armour. I still think there are a couple of weaknesses in the Future Soldier programme. One is that the number of armoured brigade combat teams reduces from three to two, which will mean that the British heavy division will have only two ground manoeuvre divisions. Most NATO countries' divisions have at least three, and I think that raises some eyebrows.

Also, the deep strike reconnaissance brigade is an interesting concept. An ad hoc deep strike reconnaissance brigade was formed by 1st Armoured Division during Operation Granby. It did not work well and was disbanded, if you like, under fire. Whether the reconnaissance assets in the deep strike reconnaissance brigade will give an advantage, particularly in finding the enemy in urban areas, we will see.

There is quite a lot of risk in the design of the third division, particularly, as we have discussed before, the apparent abandonment of the armoured infantry fighting vehicle capability, bearing in mind that Warrior, which



HOUSE OF COMMONS

currently has a turret with a 30 mm cannon, is being replaced not by an armoured infantry fighting vehicle but by a wheeled armoured personnel carrier. To reduce the firepower of the brigades in the division is a bit of a risk.

Chair: A worrying state of affairs. Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts. I will turn our focus to the Indo-Pacific. Derek, take us away.

- Q89 **Derek Twigg:** Thank you. You will know the debate about whether this tilt to the Indo-Pacific is something that we should be doing—and whether we are doing it—given what is going on in Ukraine and our responsibilities this side of the world. From your point of view, and given what you know, how committed is the UK to this tilt to the Indo-Pacific?

Veerle Nouwens: I think that the defence component of the Indo-Pacific tilt was perhaps the biggest point of tension when the integrated review came out. It received quite a lot of media focus. But we have to put that in context when we look at other areas that the UK is engaging in as part of the Indo-Pacific tilt. Defence is really a smaller, supportive role in that respect. It is primarily economic and diplomatic—in that respect, the UK has been doing quite a lot. If we look at the modest contribution that the UK was seeking to deliver as part of the tilt, it has done quite well in delivering that so far, be that the carrier strike group deployment, which was a success, the two OPVs that will roam for the foreseeable future, a littoral response group by 2023, or, of course, a frigate by the end of the decade. In addition to defence and diplomatic work—an enhanced network, in that respect—that is actually quite a modest contribution to make to the region.

I think what the UK has done is set expectations for a credible delivery of the tilt. The question is, of course, what comes next? There has been a lot of sincerity; I think there has also been a lot of appreciation in the region among close partners but also among regional organisations such as ASEAN. The UK's ability to become a dialogue partner so quickly is a testament to that fact. The question is now what the UK does next with the assets it has in the region. I think there are still some questions in the Indo-Pacific in various corners of key countries, which understand and appreciate the UK's interest and commitment so far but question to a certain extent the sustainability of its defence engagement in the region. Here, again, I think setting expectations is going to be absolutely key. It is clear that there are naval assets that can be contributed. There is lots of training that can be done. In some other domains there is potentially less scope for the UK to contribute concretely, given demands in Europe and around Ukraine. But that is not to say that there is not quite a lot of room for manoeuvre for the UK over the coming years.

- Q90 **Derek Twigg:** Can I pursue that: when you say that there is quite a lot of room for manoeuvre, what do you mean?

Veerle Nouwens: In terms of understanding how to best leverage what the UK already has in the region, if we look for example at the presence it has across the atolls of the Indian Ocean region—not just in the Gulf—and

its south-east Asian presence, that sets the UK up for an interesting opportunity to have more of a leading role there. In that respect, with the road map with India, and the discussions about collaboration and co-operation in the western Indian Ocean, there is a lot of opportunity and scope for the UK to engage there.

One additional point that we might touch on later is, if there are flashpoints in the region, there is of course a resource question as to how much the UK can contribute. But we can think a lot more creatively in that respect as to how best the UK can play a role.

Derek Twigg: To sum up what you are saying, there is not going to be any significant defence capability increase in the Indo-Pacific in the near future if we have not got that capability.

Veerle Nouwens: In the next couple of years I suppose it will be difficult to see an immense step up. At the same time, I do not think we have had that signal coming from the UK, so it is about setting expectations that the UK can live up to.

Derek Twigg: Brigadier?

Ben Barry: We wrote a large report on the military implications of the tilt in the first half of the year, which included both work in the UK and a workshop in the region. We also commissioned work from the region by academics and officials, which is reflected in the report. As we did this, it was quite difficult to decide what the priority for the tilt was. Was it economics, political—particularly values—or military? We came to the conclusion that the UK's priority appeared to be economics and prosperity. Therefore, the import role of the defence footprint was to try to achieve defence sales.

It is quite interesting that the written evidence you were given by the MoD lists three reasons for doing the tilt: the first is prosperity, the second is security and the third is values. I do not know whether that reflects its priorities, but it quite hard to discern the priorities in the documents that have been produced and the official statements by various Prime Ministers. I agree with everything said by my peers; there is part of the UK's approach that certainly makes sense, which is not to be an intrusive external power, not to crash around the region and not to force its military views on other nations.

There is a whole spectrum of attitudes among nations in the region—it is a huge region—from warmly welcoming and actively seeking more military co-operation to a more nuanced attitude; many nations in the region do not want to have to make a hard choice, for example, between supporting the US and its allies and interfering with their relationship, particularly their economic relationship, with China. The approach has been quite balanced in that respect, particularly with the offshore patrol vessels, which do not have a home port in the region, but migrate around.

Q91 **Derek Twigg:** Obviously, we are talking about the defence aspect here. Do you not see any significant increase in using defence capability in that



region? Would it be a similar level to where we are now?

Ben Barry: Yes. Again, in the official documents there is a dog that doesn't bark, and that is the relative priorities for the various components of UK defence. Quite clearly, the Royal Navy has been directed to assign forces to the region: the two OPVs and the new littoral group coming in this year, and a frigate in the long term. But the Defence Command Paper assigns the Army no priorities for the region. It tells the Royal Air Force that the region is equal in priority to the Middle East and Africa, and it fails to assign any priorities to Strategic Command. You might want to explore that with Ministers and officials when they testify in front of you. It may well be a reflection of the British intention not to divert the Army, the Royal Air Force or Strategic Command away from their current commitments to the region.

Q92 **Chair:** That was an interesting comment about the UK and so forth not crashing around the region. Is there not a wider call—a sense of duty, if you like—as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, with two of those members now choosing a different long-term approach to the international rules-based order? Is there not a sense of duty that we should be using our convening power—our thought leadership—to say where the world, particularly the Indo-Pacific, is heading, given the dangers there?

Ben Barry: Yes. To be fair to the Government, I think that is why they talk about values and the rules-based international order, and it is why, for example, naval vessels that have visited the region have taken part in embargo operations against North Korea, but of course this leads to the question: what is the actual military potential to make a difference in a crisis in the region? We have done quite a bit of work on this, some of which has been published and some of which has not. If, for example, there were a crisis between Japan and China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and the UK chose to send its two offshore patrol vessels, they would not have much frontline influence. They would not have the same influence as frigates, destroyers, amphibious groups and other ships.

Q93 **Sarah Atherton:** Is it naive to think that the UK can do trade with China without having that military presence?

Ben Barry: I hadn't thought of it like that. It is possible, of course, that some aspects of British military presence and activities—if the British chose to seriously contest those Chinese offshore installations in the South China sea—could have negative trade consequences. China has used trade as a weapon, not least in an embargo of imports of Philippine bananas when they had a maritime dispute; I think the Philippines eventually had to back down.

Q94 **Chair:** Veerle, did you want to come in quickly?

Veerle Nouwens: Very quickly. Is it naive? I think it is a reality that you have to be willing to do both. That is as much a reality for us as it is for China. Other countries in the region that have their own disputes with

China and their own rising tensions do both, too. It is about understanding what the limit is of what we are willing to accept.

It was quite interesting to see that when the UK sailed through the Paracels in 2018, the consequence was, I believe, a diplomatic freeze of a certain dialogue for a little while, and then that got lifted. That might not be the case next time, but we have to understand and anticipate a range of potential responses by the Chinese.

We must also calibrate that with our priority and interests. As you said, the UK has a role to play in that part of the world. On that point, I would say that it is incredibly important for the UK to be discussing these issues with its close partners in the region. That is something it has been doing extensively, not least of course with the United States. It is reportedly discussing potential scenarios around Taiwan and what the UK role in that respect might be. If we are talking about the UK as a P5 member state—as a convening power—it is those discussions that are incredibly important, before even any potential conflict happens. That is where the UK has a lot more that it can do.

If we are talking about flashpoints, the UK might not necessarily need to be physically present in the region in a conflict. For example, on Taiwan, the UK is of course a distant power—it is not present to the extent that France, Australia and Japan are—but there are other ways in which it can still live up to its obligations. As I said, it has an incredible presence in the Indian ocean region. Sea lines of communication should be protected. We should be thinking about secondary and tertiary order knock-on effects and potential flashpoints in the region, and UK assets can certainly play a role there.

Chair: Thank you. Let's look at UK assets a bit further.

Q95 **Mr Jones:** Brigadier, you mentioned the Royal Navy's presence in the region. Has the Royal Navy got the capacity to have any significant presence in the region?

Ben Barry: The de facto scenario is the permanent presence of its two OPVs, to be joined by this amphibious group, with occasional patrols by other warships and a possibility of another major large task group going. But we have to be realistic: the war in Ukraine has changed the calculus. Although the Russian Army is busy inflicting attrition on itself, there hasn't been much attrition on the Russian Navy.

Although the Navy would appear to be the lowest priority for funding of the Russian Armed Forces, that doesn't necessarily apply to its fleet of very capable submarines. Every single warship, as opposed to patrol vessel, that is in the Indo-Pacific is not one in Europe. At the moment, the main security challenge to the UK and its interests is fair and square in Europe.

Q96 **Mr Jones:** I understand the diplomatic usefulness of the reach that we have got into that part of the world, but do you think the real problem has been the difference between the political rhetoric and what we can



actually deliver as a nation in that region from a military point of view?

Ben Barry: Yes, you are right. There is no other way of seeing it. One of the things that came out of our work is that most of the nations that we talked to in the region broadly welcomed the increased UK presence. I should say that there has been a substantive increase in UK defence diplomacy—the footprint of attachés and now this formation of a new British defence headquarters in Canberra. That does enable the sort of talking that Veerle described. I was in complete agreement with what she said earlier, but they are all concerned that this may not be sustainable. They all keep a very close eye on UK defence, and they all have very active attachés here in London.

Q97 **Mr Jones:** Two OPVs is window dressing, because they are pretty useless. They are not really going to do anything, apart from, as you say, a defence diplomacy role. Do we need some realism—to be straight with people about what we will do in the region? As you say, it is a defence diplomacy role and an economic role.

We need to be realistic that, unless we have a massive increase in our defence capability, there is no way that we will have something comparable to what the Americans have in that part of the world. We will never really have a great physical presence, will we?

Ben Barry: You are right in what you say. Of course, we need to take into account the growing of regional capability, the significant increase in the Japanese defence budget—a more assertive posture and larger forces—and Australia's strategic refresh. We should not forget New Zealand.

I think there are a couple of practical military implications, which I would like to take you through. I do not think that offshore patrol vessels are useless. There are a lot of navies in the regions, particularly those of smaller states, that have a relatively modest capability. They are more brown water than blue water: fishery protection and guarding against smuggling and non-conventional threats, including terrorism, for example, in the Sulu sea.

Q98 **Mr Jones:** That is what it is, but it is not any major capability, is it? That is more a diplomatic role.

Ben Barry: Well, for countries such as Tonga, it is quite a significant capability; Tonga was able to help with disaster relief. For the smaller nations, and also for those nations that are sceptical about closer military co-operation with the UK, co-operating with an OPV on countering illegal fishing is a lot easier than co-operating with a frigate or a destroyer.

I would say that, when it arrives, the littoral group will be a very useful contribution, although the UK needs to be clear on what its strategic interest in the western Indian ocean is. The MoD evidence rather stressed the importance of Oman and Kenya for their own sake. They are not actually in the western Indian ocean. It is also a fact that the south-east corner of the region—that long peninsula the middle of which is Singapore and Indonesia, and heading down to the south-west Pacific—is threatened



HOUSE OF COMMONS

by a lot of natural disasters: earthquakes, volcanoes and typhoons. Amphibious shipping is extremely useful in disaster relief in that region.

Whether the littoral group will get pulled from the western Indian ocean more towards south-east Asia is an interesting point, but it is quite significant that it does not appear that there will be any substantive uptick in Army activity, Air Force activity or in the activity of the various elements of strategic command.

Veerle Nouwens: I question your premise. You are talking about the UK as if it necessarily needs to have the presence of the United States. I do not think that the UK has said that it will do that, and nor do countries in the region expect that of the United Kingdom. Again, no, the UK will not have the same level of footprint in the region, but that is not the task.

Q99 **Mr Jones:** I am not suggesting that, but that is the rhetoric, certainly from the Johnson Administration: that somehow this was global Britain again, with a massive presence everywhere. I am trying to get some reality into what we can actually achieve. I see the importance of what has just been said about diplomacy, but we need some political realism in the UK on this.

Veerle Nouwens: Again, I think we have moved on from that conversation, though. The Integrated Review, the tilt and the Defence Command Paper have made that quite clear. Conversations that are being had, and conversations that I have had with partners in the region, certainly indicate that that is absolutely not the expectation that they have of the United Kingdom. With all due respect, I am not sure that I would agree with that point.

On the point of the OPVs, I fully agree with Ben. They serve an enormous purpose, which, again, goes to the heart of what countries in the region want. What do they see positively? This is a less confrontational way of engaging with countries that certainly would like to do more in capacity building and things around some of the non-traditional issues that Ben has just mentioned, but also shipwrighting and joint exercises. It is enormously useful, and if you look at the geographic presence that the OPVs have had, that has been quite a good and successful exercise for the UK.

Q100 **Mr Jones:** I do not disagree with you on that, but the problem is trying to get the reality politically here. The impression was given, certainly from the Johnson Administration, that somehow this was a major shift in defence—like going back to an east of Suez type thing, which it is not. I do not disagree with what you say in terms of the relationship building. I was in Japan last year and industrial co-operation with Japan is very valuable.

Veerle Nouwens: Absolutely, and there is certainly more industrial co-operation that can be done. The UK is looking to explore opportunities, so that is very positive. I would stress that, from my conversations in the region, it is not necessarily about an expectation that the UK will be a significant player in the region, but it is about consistency and



sustainability. Even if it is the two OPVs—a frigate later in the year—it is about matching that rhetoric to do what they actually deliver, and that being consistent. In that respect, so far we are on the right track. The question is: what will the refresh deliver and what will the future plans hold for the UK?

Q101 John Spellar: Both our witnesses have mentioned the western Indian ocean. That seems to be pulling the envelope over a very considerable area and expanding the requirement, whereas most of the focus, certainly in the political dialogue, has been more on the south-east Asia/east Asia area and the various flashpoints there.

It also seems that there is considerable scope for us to provide support for nations there, particularly, for example, in protection of their fishing capacity, which is being stripped out by industrial fishing fleets. That is sort of sub-conflict, but still very important for their sustainability. In that context, how can we best use our existing assets in the region? Also, as a subset of that, should we look at pursuing further permanent bases in the region?

Ben Barry: I will start, if I may. It is quite significant that neither the Integrated Review nor the Defence Command Paper actually define the region, and that geography has interesting implications. For example, USINDOPACOM includes India, but it does not include Pakistan, which is a state bordering on the western Indian ocean. Pakistan and India are definitely western Indian ocean and definitely states that the UK cannot walk away from because of the diaspora. The UK has enormous ambitions for an improved partnership with India, and it must keep up its relationships with Pakistan, including on anti-terrorism and Afghanistan.

There is a lot that could be done. One thing we have not mentioned so far is the impact of climate change. Island nations are greatly threatened by it. For example, the Maldives defence Minister at the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue six months ago categorically stated that at least one island had become uninhabitable. That is one of 14, and the omens are not particularly good for low-lying island states throughout the region. Helping manage the consequences and helping with disaster relief, bearing in mind that all the expert predictions are that extreme weather events are going to increase, is something the UK can do. They can also assist with capacity building.

We should not forget that UK ships in the various taskforces in the Gulf participate in multinational counter-terrorism, including quite extensive work with Pakistan. India has an extremely large Navy, and they have certainly told me that they would welcome more co-operation with the British. I imagine there is a lot of scope for productive work with western Indian ocean states. The UK quite clearly has an ambition to do a lot more with India; I don't know whether it has the resources to do as much in all three domains with the Indians, as they would like.

Veerle Nouwens: Just to feed into that, I completely agree. On the point of maritime capacity building in south-east Asia in particular, that is

literally an objective that you see mentioned by just about everyone who has an Indo-Pacific strategy and wants to do something in south-east Asia. Maritime capacity building is the number one thing that you will come across. There is a saturation there.

What the UK would be best placed to do is look at what its partners are doing and try to find a niche area to deliver training or exercises. It can find its own added value in that respect. With regard to IUU fishing, building resilience and capacity at the national level is incredibly key. It is not about the UK going there and patrolling the south China sea; it is about building resilience for willing states in the region itself.

On the issue of permanent basing, I would add that this is an incredibly sensitive topic. I do not see much scope for foreign bases to proliferate in the region. We are already looking at a time of heightened geopolitical tensions, and nobody in the region wants to be seen as potentially picking a side. It is just incredibly sensitive for countries to be setting up new bases, and it would potentially be seen in that light.

Q102 John Spellar: What about Singapore, where we already have a presence?

Veerle Nouwens: Sure, but you wouldn't be setting up a new base. If you were to expand that, there would have to be a very close discussion with Singapore itself about what it was comfortable with. Again, it is about the local comfort levels in the region and what states would be willing to do. Even then, the sensitivities around Singapore, the US-China competition and rising tensions in the region are always at the forefront of what they say, which is, "Don't make us choose. Don't make this a more difficult situation." That goes for everyone.

Instead of looking at opportunities for new bases, I would encourage examining existing presences to see what can be done creatively to multiply their added value, in consultation with countries in the region to see what they would be comfortable with. The reciprocal access agreement signed with Japan—the one under discussion with India—is also a fantastic force multiplier where you don't have to create new bases. You have that access in place for the UK to go out there, and the other way around. I think that is a more realistic approach for the time being.

John Spellar: Thank you very much.

Chair: We have Sarah wanting to come in and then Emma, so be quick.

Q103 Sarah Atherton: How important is it to UK interests to maintain a foothold in Diego Garcia?

Ben Barry: The Government say it is very important, and that would seem to be the case. Diego Garcia has had enormous utility as an airbase over the last decade and it continues to have that. A reminder of that is the fact that maritime patrol aircraft are invaluable in the region. The UK has had a bit of a gap on that. It is only getting eight P-8s. It was quite interesting that the carrier task group wasn't accompanied by a maritime patrol aircraft, when it might have been a decade ago.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I will broaden that a bit to talk about basing. I have had a good look at this. You need to look at a globe, rather than a map, but UK basing does complement other external powers' basing. You have Diego Garcia and the small, modest footprint in Singapore. You have Brunei and the OPVs migrating around.

Those bases aren't where all the big US bases are. They are in Japan, the Philippines and South Korea, so they are orientated against north-east Asia. We must not forget that France is a regional power, and it is in the western Indian ocean, in Réunion and Mayotte. It is also in the south-west Pacific. In fact, in terms of deployed forces, it has almost three times the footprint of the UK. That is something that, perhaps, the Integrated Review drafter forgot about when they said that the UK was going to be the most present European nation in the Indo-Pacific.

It is very important that, as well as co-operating with its traditional allies—the US, Japan, Australia and New Zealand—the UK co-operates with France. While, I think, in the previous Government, there was a bit of a dip on that, particularly with AUKUS, which President Macron took as a personal betrayal, I understand that official meetings between British and French Defence staff continue, and there is sensible co-operation. However, it is striking that that written evidence that the MoD gave you did not mention France at all. I think you ought to ask why that was.

Q104 Chair: Just a quick one to Veerle. It worries me when we hear comments like, "Because of heightened political tension, we shouldn't do anything to rattle the cages." That is exactly what the bully wants to hear. They want us to be afraid and not to respond or prepare ourselves, perhaps, for what may be coming over the horizon. Whether it is looking at bases, or even going further and preparing ourselves for a gradual demise in global security, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, should we not be more front-footed—more robust? That is exactly what Russia has done in Ukraine—exploited our timidity.

Veerle Nouwens: Yes. I think those are slightly different points, though. I agree with you that the UK should not shy away from anticipating a range of scenarios in the region that are very problematic for not just the UK and its own interests but regional and global interests. As I said earlier, that work should be under way now, very much behind the scenes, but also in public, saying that there are certain scenarios or certain behaviours that just are not acceptable. To be fair, I think that you see the UK, the US and others doing that publicly, so that is good.

However, I would say that basing is a very sensitive issue. It is on the sovereign territory of other states, and it must be according to what they are comfortable with. I do not see how you could get around that. So if this is a serious ambition—if this is a serious request on the part of the UK—then those conversations need to be happening behind the scenes, because it is just incredibly sensitive. That is not because the UK wants to shy away from China, but it is really about understanding the comfort levels and the perspectives of the states in the region, who are there permanently.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q105 Chair: We are about to go on to look at acute events and how we might respond, but to wrap this section up, there is a NATO, clearly, for European-Atlantic interests. Should we be creating something similar for the Indo-Pacific? Brigadier?

Ben Barry: Well, there is the Quad, but the Quad is essentially a four-sided political dialogue. It is not a NATO. The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus does promote some very modest military co-operation, but it is on topics that it is possible for people to agree on, such as military medicine, humanitarian and disaster relief, and peacekeeping. ASEAN is definitely not a NATO.

If the regional nations wanted a NATO, they would have created one, but their strategic interests, their strategic culture, and their national interests, including how activist they want to be in co-operating with external powers, are very different. My impression is that, if the balloon went up, and there was a military crisis, or even a shooting war, the lead role, certainly in a Taiwan or North Korea crisis, would be played by the existing US command and control, and USPACOM, to which other nations would be expected to integrate.

Q106 Chair: The situation has now changed. The scale of the military mass that China now has, at air, land and sea, is a game changer in that region. That is why it could necessitate greater consideration for a Pacific NATO equivalent.

Ben Barry: If we were to use a parallel, there is no NATO equivalent for the nations in the Gulf, but I have the impression that many of the military functions that would be performed by NATO are performed by USCENTCOM. It is possible to imagine, in the event of a serious challenge or an actual flare-up, that the same would happen.

Chair: Veerle, do you have any comments, or shall we move on?

Veerle Nouwens: I think there is very little interest from countries in the region.

Q107 Richard Drax: So far, we have talked about anything other than conflict. My colleague Kevan Jones—I paraphrase him—said we must be careful that our rhetoric matches our military capability, and it probably does not, with only two OPVs out there.

The Americans have been hinting, and I have a quote from the Defence Secretary, Lloyd Austin, in 2021 saying that maybe the UK could focus elsewhere. I assume he was talking about the Atlantic, which the UK has traditionally been responsible for. We also have Admiral Radakin, at a RUSI debate, posing a rhetorical question: "Might it mean a British carrier regularly deployed in the Indo-Pacific at the heart of an allied strike group?"

Clearly, there is a lot of indecision, and of course it all probably comes down to money at the end of the day, and our priorities. If conflict does break out in the Indo-Pacific in the areas that are potentially under threat, what role could or should we in the UK play?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ben Barry: Assuming that it was a problem that the Americans and local countries required more help with, the UK has got some high-readiness assets it could deploy that could get there relatively quickly by air. That would include special forces and Rivet Joint, and it might include some UAVs. It could include some F-35s, which of course are interoperable with the US. It could include maritime patrol aircraft. Indeed, UK air transport could have a useful role in the region.

If that were not sufficient, the UK would have to look at sending some serious combat power. The tyranny of distance applies; the sailing distance from the UK to Singapore at 20 knots is over 20 days. You have also got considerable logistic challenges.

The nations in the region, such as South Korea, Japan and Taiwan are going to have to look very carefully at their logistic stockpiles. Whether they would have stockpiles to spare for British forces entering the region is not clear to me. It is not clear to me that the Americans have enough logistic support for themselves, let alone for helping the British.

There is a pointer from history here. In 1944, the British deployed a small carrier task group to the region, to work alongside the US. Logistics proved extremely problematic. Although the US carriers could fight continuously at sea, the British carriers had to pulse and then return to stock up. You might choose to ask your Ministry of Defence witnesses whether, if the UK sent anything other than small rapid reaction forces by air, it could actually do the logistics itself and in a timely fashion? I don't know.

Q108 **Richard Drax:** Battles are won and fought on the logistical chain, aren't they? That is proven throughout history. Veerle, have you got anything you would like to add?

Veerle Nouwens: Yes, in addition to what Ben said, logistics will have to be something that the UK co-ordinates with its closest allies. Again, talking about those contingencies and looking at what scenarios might look like is something that can start now.

There are also secondary areas that the UK can look at in terms of how it can help: helping to secure the secondary locations that I mentioned, where they are present; looking at providing intelligence as well; and providing cyber-capabilities might be another. We also can't forget that there will likely be requirements for medical supplies and other non-military supplies. That is an area everyone could potentially help out, including the UK.

Ben Barry: That is where the difference of direction from the MoD to other parts of the armed forces and the Navy is a touch puzzling. There are big important armies in the region. They have political impacts of considerable importance. Many of the scenarios involve substantive land and air conflict—for example, a Taiwan conflict if China got ashore, or a second Korean war. If the UK is really serious about making a significant contribution if the shooting starts, we would expect to see much more



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Royal Air Force activity and much more Army activity in the region. In theory, that would not be difficult. What the carrier task group did could be replicated by the Royal Air Force or the Army. The Air Force could send an expeditionary air wing and have it move through the region, exercising with local partners, including those it might operate with if the shooting starts. The Army, for example, could send part or all of its global response force on a similar deployment that uses lily pads throughout the region. All that is perfectly doable, but whether the UK wants to do that, and whether it has the capacity to do it, given Ukraine, is not at all clear to me. That rather relates to Mr Jones's earlier question.

Q109 Richard Drax: But all the points you are raising reinforce the Chairman's point about some NATO equivalent. What you are saying here is that there is a complete lack of cohesion, planning and preparation in the event, God forbid, of some sort of conflict out there, with everyone really not quite sure what they are going to contribute. Surely, if we have some NATO-style organisation, the Americans can say, "Look, we'll deal with this, you deal with that, and South Korea will deal with this." It seems to me that there is a complete lack of planning and preparation, which are two important elements to deter, quite apart from fighting a war.

Ben Barry: We should be under no doubt that an enormous amount of planning and preparation goes on in USINDOPACOM in Hawaii, and there is a lot of planning and preparation, for example, for the defence of Japan. Taiwan is really quite busy planning its own defence. Indeed, there is a big architecture of planning and preparation in the UN command headquarters in Korea, to which the British have sent a three-star officer. If sufficient states in the region had a critical mass of demand for something like a NATO, they would create it. The political trends and the diverging national strategic cultures and national interests militate against that for the foreseeable future, I am afraid.

Chair: Thank you for that. Sarah.

Q110 Sarah Atherton: To go back to Richard's point, are you happy with the way the UK is co-ordinating its response in the Indo-Pacific, particularly with France and Australia? Ben first, and then we will go to Veerle.

Ben Barry: Yes, it seems to me that adequate amounts of co-ordination are going on, and the uptick in defence diplomats and attachés in the British military headquarters in Singapore and Canberra is going to help with that. There are quite a few liaison officers deployed to INDOPACOM and to Japan, and I mentioned the British three-star in Korea. You could probably always use more, but certainly more is going on. Our contacts with the states in the region are not telling us they are not having enough co-ordination, if you see what I mean—a double negative that proves a positive. We do see that. We have the Shangri-La Dialogue sherpa meeting going on in Singapore as we speak, and the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue brings together a lot of the strategic actors in the region. So I think the UK is doing that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

With regards to UK strategy in the region, though, one thing that came out of our work was that there did not appear to be a national grand strategy for China. There is lots of analysis and policy on China in the Integrated Review and the defence command paper, and of course, there is the Prime Minister's recent speech where he majored on the topic. However, if there is a proper grand inter-agency strategy for the UK approach to China, we are not aware of it.

Sarah Atherton: Veerle, any comments?

Veerle Nouwens: I agree with that. In general, I think UK-Australia co-operation is in full swing. I think that's pretty solid. UK-France co-operation in the Indo-Pacific, from what I understand, is now getting back on track, but that is a complicated picture. Of course, there are different levels to that, but it is not in the situation that we saw right after the announcement of AUKUS—I will put it that way—so that is improving.

The UK is also present in terms of liaison officers at information fusion centres, so helping and exchanging information around the maritime domain is another area in which the UK is co-ordinating closely in the Indo-Pacific. Those are all beneficial ways that the UK is engaging.

In terms of what else it can do, again, I would say it is about having those conversations around potential scenarios. That is happening behind the scenes—it is not something you will see in public. That is an area where I think a lot of countries certainly benefit from engaging.

Q111 **Sarah Atherton:** Taking into account the UK's commitment to Ukraine and the disproportionate cost of projecting and sustaining forces in the Indo-Pacific, and given the size of the People's Liberation Army, should the UK just concentrate on the Euro-Atlantic, Ben?

Ben Barry: I do not think it can walk away from the economic significance of the region or the way that China is acting as a malign actor in many ways. That activity has an important footprint in the region, of course, but it reaches globally—for example, the incident outside the Chinese consulate in Manchester and the reports of Chinese unofficial police stations in the UK and Canada. You can't just deal with China, with the problems it poses, locally.

The UK has some shared interests with China, such as a shared interest in climate change. China is busy seeking the economic opportunities that come from climate change—not least solar power and rare earths. China is a member of the P5, and the UK is able to co-operate with them in the corridors of the UN. Slowly but steadily over the past 20 years or so, China has increased its footprint on UN peacekeeping operations, such as in Africa.

The Government have judged that a very modest amount of military capability can have an effect in the Indo-Pacific region; this morning, we have explored many of the limitations on that and perhaps many of the uncomfortable questions that the Government might rather not be pressed

on. But my judgment is that the modest contribution of the two OPVs and the forthcoming littoral group in the western Indo-Pacific is proportionate.

Chair: Finally, Emma.

Q112 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Good morning both. Following on from Sarah's comments on co-operation with allies, what is the most effective way for the UK to interact with regional institutions such as ASEAN?

Ben Barry: As Veerle says, it is to talk to them. It is also to do stuff.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: What can we do, though?

Ben Barry: It is turning up and taking part in their exercises, which is particularly useful. It is capacity building. It is also defence sales. We haven't really touched on that, but the Government quite clearly see enormous opportunities. I would observe that the opportunities have increased because of the apparent poor performance of many Russian weapons and military equipment. For example, about two thirds of India's military equipment is of Russian origin, including quite a bit they have built themselves. I suspect that the Indian military is rather worried about the effectiveness of quite a bit of that equipment.

However, you have to be there. One thing we have picked up is that there has at times been a lot of disappointment in the region when the British haven't turned up. Defence attachés have told me that cancellations of ship visits and deployments of air squadrons have been disappointing in the region. There have been reasons for that, including covid and serviceability problems, but it might be interesting to ask the MoD to produce a table of exercise deployments in the region for the past 10 years, including those that haven't taken place. It is about being there and doing stuff that the nations and their militaries want you to do.

Q113 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Is it right to say that it would be better for us to help them build capacity in their own defence industries and not necessarily have a military presence there?

Ben Barry: I think both of them are important. We have covered how there would be pushback for more permanent basing in the region, but I suspect if you actually went to each of those nations concerned and said, "What would you like to see the British military doing?" they would produce quite a long list that is considerably in excess of what the British military can do.

Veerle Nouwens: This is where co-ordination with the UK's closest partners who are equally engaged is so crucial. A number of new initiatives have sprouted up over the last year or two, and the UK is involved in quite a few of them. Again, that is an opportunity for co-ordination. In terms of multilateral engagement, the UK has done well in terms of ASEAN, for example. It seems to have expressed interest in participating in forums of ASEAN, for example, that it is not necessarily part of, such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus, where they have working groups and the UK is interested in being an official observer.

Those are ways the UK can, again, creatively participate in various themed discussions and workshops. This has to be complemented, at the end of the day, with a bilateral approach. There are two tracks: multilateral, and then with your key countries with which you already have strong relationships and have opportunities. To that effect, regarding what Ben already said, there is quite a lot of scope.

Q114 Mrs Lewell-Buck: Do you think we should join the Quad?

Veerle Nouwens: I think the question is whether the Quad wants the UK to join and whether it is ready for additional partners to join. At the moment, there does not seem to be an indication that it is quite ready for that. Again, this is about appetite level and comfort level in the region, and I think that right now the Quad is very much in a mode of consolidation of the various streams that it has entered into co-operation on. If there is ever an opportunity where the UK has been invited to participate, either officially as a member or as an observer, then sure. If there is capacity for the UK to do so—there is a range of issues that the Quad is looking at, from supply chains to climate change to vaccines, there could be a role for the UK, but it has to be in accordance with the members of the Quad and what they want.

Ben Barry: The UK is strongly engaged, as we have discussed, with Japan, the US and Australia, and it has a considerable ambition to do much more with India. In a sense, it is already reaching the four corners of the Quad.

Q115 Chair: My final question is on Japan. We have signed a new deal, a new collaboration, with Japan. You speak of the Quad. I have always found it to be an interesting body—almost a prelude to a potential NATO if we were to include France and Britain, but I am particularly interested in whether we should be looking at Japan. We have a lot of allies, as we have discussed, but as Japan looks to reconsider its own defence posture, is that a country that we should be getting much, much closer to?

Ben Barry: From all the evidence we have heard this morning, the answer has to be yes.

Veerle Nouwens: Absolutely. I think that is well under way.

Chair: Thank you very much for allowing us to conclude this first session, Veerle Nouwens and Brigadier Ben Barry. We are going to take a quick pause while we swap panels, but thank you for joining us today.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Seth Jones and John Hemmings.

Chair: Welcome back to this Defence Committee hearing. We will continue with our second panel. I am delighted to welcome Seth Jones, who is the director of the international security programme at CSIS; and John Hemmings, who is the senior director of Indo-Pacific foreign and security policy at the Pacific Forum. They have both got up very early to join us via

Zoom from the United States; thank you very much indeed.

We now turn to the United States and its interest in the Indo-Pacific, starting off with strategy. Gavin Robinson, over to you.

Q116 **Gavin Robinson:** Good morning, gentlemen. Mr Jones, may I ask you first how important you believe the Indo-Pacific region is to the United States and its defence capability going forward?

Seth Jones: That is a good question and a fundamental one. If one looks at the US's recently released national security strategy and the national defence strategy, the Indo-Pacific is critical. The documents highlight that it is in many ways the most important region, in part because China is viewed as the "pacing" threat. US military posture—air, naval and marine presence in particular—is increasingly focused on the Indo-Pacific. That is probably a little bit less the case for the US army, which has seen a plus-up over the last year with the Russian invasion in Europe. North Korea remains a significant concern.

I would just make a couple of caveats. Obviously, there is concern about the Russian invasion and continuing US support to Ukraine. NATO remains the bedrock of the US's role in Europe. There certainly could be problems elsewhere, as we have seen over the last several decades in the Middle East with Iran, as well as Latin America and other places, so although I say that the Indo-Pacific is critical, it is all contingent on the evolving landscape.

Q117 **Gavin Robinson:** Thank you, sir. Mr Hemmings, you will have heard reference there to the national security strategy, and you will know well that it talks about China being the only nation with the intent and power to reshape the world order. From a national security perspective, how does the US consider China specifically?

John Hemmings: The Indo-Pacific strategy specifically calls China a source of challenge to peace and security in the region. It also refers to its coercion and aggression, which spans the globe but is most acute in the Indo-Pacific, and affects US allies and US partners like India. It is sort of the pacing threat. I think you see that reflected in the national security strategy and the national defence strategy. In essence, it has become the pre-eminent challenge. Having said that, the United States still says it will compete with China responsibly and try to co-operate on issues like climate change and non-proliferation.

Q118 **Gavin Robinson:** There is a sense in the strategy document that the US is ahead of most allied nations in its considered view of China and the region. There is a recognition that the UK is probably more aligned with the US in the hardening of position, but none of the allies is as far advanced as that. Is there much pushback in the US—in your circles, in think-tanks and discussions around these issues—or is it the pretty settled view of people in academia, defence think-tanks and so on that China is a threat, as outlined in the strategic document?



John Hemmings: In DC, there are still some areas where I believe there is disagreement, but for the most part, from 2007 onwards you saw increasingly mainstream think-tanks and media begin to shift the debate away from the responsible stakeholder framework. Really, I think the primary article from Ely Ratner and Kurt Campbell, who are both now in this current Administration—their *Foreign Affairs* piece on how the United States got China wrong—was the moment the mainstream accepted that argument.

Q119 **Gavin Robinson:** Mr Jones, any further reflections on that before I hand back to the Chair?

Seth Jones: I would agree. I do think, as John noted, that there are some differences in view. However, as we saw with the last Administration, there was growing concern highlighted by the national defence strategy from Mattis, who was Secretary of Defence at the time. Now we have a Democratic Administration in place that also highlights China as a competitor. While there are some differences, there is growing concern that the People's Liberation Army is developing power projection capabilities.

If we look at the US's recent discussions with Australians, South Koreans and even the Japanese last week with the Prime Minister's visit, there is increasing worry about PLA power projection and expanding capabilities, and PLA navy ships in the region. Solomon Islands was certainly a worrying development for the potential for Chinese activity and potentially a base in an area that the US Marine Corps had fought over during world war two. I think what it means is that, from a political standpoint now, and with two separate Administrations and Republicans and Democrats—particularly centrist ones—concerned about China, there is as close to a common view as we have seen recently.

Q120 **Richard Drax:** Good afternoon, gentlemen. Bearing in mind that the threat is very real in the Indo-Pacific—either North Korea or China, as we all know—what tangible steps has the United States taken, both militarily and diplomatically in the region over the past four years and how effective have they been? Perhaps I can get you also to look at India. How successful have you been in drawing them into the fold, bearing in mind that they are remaining pretty neutral, not least on Ukraine, and what they are doing? They want to keep to themselves, don't they? So how successful have you been with them and the steps you have taken? Mr Hemmings, you can kick off.

John Hemmings: The Indo-Pacific strategy from both the Trump and Biden Administrations has shown that it is the priority region. But frankly, from the Bush Administration onwards, you have seen a two-handed approach towards China and the region on the one hand—engage China and try and steer it in the correct direction—and on the other hand, beginning to develop multiple trilaterals linking up the bilateral US alliance system in the region into what has been called federated capabilities. The US-Japan-ROK trilat, the US-Japan-Australia trilat and, of course, the Quad, which was mentioned in the earlier session. So there has been that

sort of ongoing process and, added on top of that, additional resources going to the region. Some of that is more in the rhetoric than the reality. The Pacific deterrence initiative has long been on the table since Senator John McCain first put it forward, but we are starting to see the loosening up of resources from US CENTCOM, from the Middle East going to the Indo-Pacific region.

There has also been, particularly where I am in Hawaii, working alongside US INDOPACOM—although we are an independent think tank—a desire to integrate allies and partners much more closely. In DC it can often be seen as one in which it is hard to get anything done. But the levels of interoperability, and command and control—unified command—are admirable compared with what exists in the current US Alliance system out here. There is actually quite a lot that the NATO model could bring in terms of good command and control, integration of technologies, interoperability and exchangeability. All this is happening now at the exercise level, and I have seen discussions unofficially and soon to be officially with countries such as Japan and South Korea. Well, Korea is already in a unified command system, but Japan is not. We are moving towards broaching that with the Japanese, but it is politically sensitive.

Most of my peers and certainly people in Government think that that is highly necessary to help deter and fight if need be.

Q121 Richard Drax: And India, Mr Hemmings, how is that going?

John Hemmings: India is going well. I track only very distantly. Again, because of the location of INDOPACOM, India is in the area of operations. I know from colleagues who work on it that the relationship is going exceedingly well, especially behind closed doors, as ever. The Quad was mentioned previously. I think the disagreements over the future of the Quad have led it away from being a potential NATO for the time being. The Chair mentioned that earlier as something that was desirable. I agree that it should be a locus or a focal point, but for the moment, because of those disagreements specifically with India, the Quad is starting to move towards providing public goods for the region—covid diplomacy was a good example. High-quality infrastructure is another.

The relationship with India is going very well, but if you want to get to where we are in Europe, there is a lot more we can do.

Q122 Richard Drax: Mr Jones, is there anything that you would like to add to the steps that the United States has taken over the past four years?

Seth Jones: Yes, a few things and then I would comment on India as well. When you look at US military posture, we have seen it decline in Africa—US Africa Command—and in the Middle East, where the US has withdrawn a number of its forces, including obviously from Afghanistan. That is the US Central Command area. We have seen an increase in that posture, some of it pushed into the Indo-Pacific. Recently, the Marine Corps has expanded some of its capabilities there. It announced last week the US Marine Littoral Regiment. I would urge everyone, if they have not seen it, to look at the US Marine Corps Force Design 2030. It is built



HOUSE OF COMMONS

almost entirely around the Indo-Pacific and the fight there. So the Marine Corps has re-established itself. It has gotten rid of tanks, in part for littoral combat. That has been quite a contentious issue.

When you look at what other steps the US has taken, it is upgrading its B-52 capabilities in Tindal in Northern Australia, with up to six B-52 nuclear-capable aircraft. It will be deploying capabilities that are really designed for an Indo-Pacific fight, including the Columbia and Virginia-class submarines. B-21 raider was announced formally in December of last year. That may have some European utility, but it is primarily a China-based capability.

A couple of other quick things. We saw the Japanese Prime Minister in Washington last week. I think there has been a push by the US for Japan to increase its capabilities in the region. It looks like the Japanese will increase defence spending by over 60% over the next five years. The US is now selling, as part of that, Tomahawks and a range of other capabilities, including UASs—unmanned, or uncrewed, systems—to the Japanese and others. Obviously, there is AUKUS, in partnership with the UK. So there is a range of developments on the military side, including posture, over the past five years that highlight where the US is.

My general sense is that that is still a fraught relationship on the military side, in part because the Indians' continuing military partnership—its arms purchases—from the Russians. It has created a lot of concern about the US selling weapons systems to the Indians. They have lots of Russian equipment, and Russians at some of the bases. There are concerns about sensitive technology sharing with the Indians in that kind of relationship. That is less true with the South Koreans, Japanese and Australians, for example. Although there has been some development with the Quad, with India there is definitely still concern about that Russian relationship.

Q123 Mr Francois: Gentlemen, I was tempted to ask about the American military presence in the Indo-Pacific region and whether it was growing, but I think you have pretty much already answered that, Seth. Could I therefore ask you a parallel question? You have mentioned AUKUS. There have been some reports in the media that the United States is considering selling or leasing the Virginia-class submarine to Australia, as it were, to get them into the submarine game much earlier than if they had to build one of their own. Is that just kite flying by one or two journalists, or is there anything materially behind it?

Seth Jones: Good question. It is unclear right now. I am aware of a lot of discussions going on, but I do not have full knowledge about where those discussions are. Having visited the bases up in Groton and Quonset Point, for example, where they build Virginia-class submarines, I can say that they are already operating at pretty serious capacity right now.

The shipyards in the US have challenges right now with attrition of the workforce, particularly of welders. There is a lot of competition in the non-defence industry. People have left. The weather up in New England, where

I am from, is not suitable for many. We have seen some challenges for some of those key submarine shipyards that build the Virginia class.

The point I am making is that HII and General Dynamics, which are involved in building those Virginia-class submarines, have as their first priority building submarines for the US navy. To add Australians to that would be a challenge in this environment, particularly for the shipyards. It is possible, but it would require a bit of innovation and rethinking about how those companies would take on the added burden. Over the last few weeks, that has been the subject of public debate in the US. I have heard it; I do not know exactly where that debate stands, but I have visited those shipyards recently and it would put a strain on them.

Mr Francois: Thank you. Does your colleague have anything to add?

John Hemmings: I think Seth is right. Until March 2023, when it is decided, the AUKUS teams working in all three countries are being extremely silent. All my interlocutors on the AUKUS teams have gone dead quiet. It is just wind out there, so I would not take it too seriously until we hear from them when they re-emerge in March.

Mr Francois: Submarines are meant to be silent, so perhaps that is in some ways appropriate.

Q124 **Chair:** May I put some of your replies together? Clearly tensions are rising with China in the South China sea. You talk about them up-arming and becoming quite a formidable military capability. The United States is doing more.

On a different scale, we are also doing more, but we are not affecting China's behaviour or agenda. They are continuing to follow their own strategy. The question, then, is: what more do we need to do to be able to contain this in a manageable way before things could ratchet out of control, escalate, or indeed be triggered by an individual incident?

Seth Jones: In my view, at the core of this—just to take a step back—are tensions built into the system right now that mean we will see inevitable competition between the Chinese on the one hand and democratic partners on the other: the US, UK and a number of allies in the Indo-Pacific. That is just because at their core the Chinese are not democratic and do not support freedom of the press or freedom of religion.

We have even seen some sliding back of their support for an open capitalist system, given how Chinese Communist Party elements within a number of corporations have tried to scale a range of issues back, and we have seen the arrests of some corporate leaders. I think tension is built into the system, in a way. I do not think that means that war is inevitable. We can talk about the war games that we have recently done at CSIS in a moment, but I would highlight a growing recognition about a range of countries in the region, based on how the war in Ukraine has evolved over the last year—it is an industrial-style war, so we look at the kinds of capabilities important there and even, somewhat differently, in the Indo-Pacific area, where distance is significant.

Taiwan, for example, is a very different case from Ukraine. We are talking about long-range stand-off weapons systems, submarines and strategic bombers. In any conflict, if you want deterrence to hold you will need to show that you have the ability for these kinds of issues.

What does that mean in practice about what we have to do collectively? One is to improve long-range stand-off capabilities. The US industrial base is really not on a wartime footing right now. It is not able to produce munitions such as long-range anti-ship missiles, or LRASMs, for example; JASSMs have extended range. Part of what the US is trying to figure out is how to ramp up its industrial base for some of the key systems necessary for deterrence.

It is the same thing with some of the allies in the region; that is why we have seen a push for the Japanese to build longer-range strike capabilities. Again, the issue here is less about war fighting and more about deterrence, at least immediately. We can talk about a whole range of diplomatic and economic issues, but those are just some key thoughts, in part based on how we have seen the war in Ukraine—a different war and an industrial-style war—evolve.

Q125 **Chair:** John, any thoughts?

John Hemmings: I agree with what Seth has said. He stressed deterrence. The national defence strategy essentially lays out the current US approach towards trying to shape PRC thinking. There is deterrence by denial, deterrence by resilience and deterrence by imposing costs. We have seen actions in all three areas. This might also lead to some ideas of where the UK could come in to assist.

Deterrence by denial is in essence trying to prohibit an invasion of Taiwan or any other such country. That is the fight today—the sort of stuff that Commander Aquilino of the Indo-Pacific Command is worried about today.

Deterrence by resilience is being able to absorb first attacks but it is also, at the societal and governance level, being able to withstand cyber and space attacks on our communications, societies and democratic institutions—interference in elections and so on.

There is also deterrence by imposing costs. If we are able to show the Chinese that the EU and UK would in fact impose the same sort of costs that they imposed on Russia, to my mind that would go a long way to deterring China from invading in the first place. But I do not think that it is clear at this point in time that they would do that or could afford it, given that China has much greater leverage in Brussels and Berlin than Moscow did.

So there are those three approaches and some thoughts on how the UK might fit into those three different forms of integrated deterrence.

Q126 **Chair:** To wrap this piece up, before we finally turn to Taiwan. There are a lot of groupings out there, alliances if you like, that are looking to strengthen their stance against China, but are very timid because of the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

power, might and intimidation of China: the Quad, AUKUS, ASEAN, for example, the Five Power Defence Arrangements. There is a series of groupings, but what is arguably missing, if you want to be provocative, is a NATO equivalent.

I remember visiting Japan a number of years ago. It didn't want to go anywhere near advancing its own defence or deterrence, because of the second world war. It was written in its constitution. How that has changed! It was touched on in the new relationship that we are now developing.

Can I pose the same question I did to the previous panel? Is this not inevitably where we need to head to, because there is an absence of a China strategy and what it means for Indo-Pacific security, unless we start to lean all in the same direction and work together?

John Hemmings: I agree completely. I am a great fan of Churchill's "The Second World War" and the idea that, in some ways, by not providing a united front, France, the UK and Belgium sort of invited German aggression.

The other panels are completely correct that the current mood in the region is: do not make us choose a narrative. I think that is a highly successful Chinese messaging campaign. The problem with that is that those countries' strategy is to try to maintain the status quo. The fact is that that is not going to happen. Even if the United States were to do nothing, the PRC still intends to change the status quo in the region.

One of these groups, or members from those groups, will ultimately begin. Their threat perceptions of the Chinese are already rising. What I worry about is that they will only be sufficient to form a group following an attempted invasion of Taiwan. My hope is that it would occur beforehand, but I don't think we are there, unfortunately.

I have written something about that on the Quad, and I got a lot of attention from Government officials on all three or four sides, but they were very different points of view. Some were very favourable and some very critical. I absolutely agree with you that integrated deterrence is best if it were collective, but unfortunately we are not there yet.

Q127 **Chair:** Seth?

Seth Jones: This is obviously a subject of intense debate. One thing that has been helpful over the past 70 years or so has been NATO's ability both to balance against the Soviets and the Russians today, as well as prevent what we saw in both world war one and world war two—that is, European states fighting each other.

The situation is obviously very different in the Indo-Pacific. Although it would make some logical sense for there to be more of a defence alliance in the Indo-Pacific, when you look at the historical and cultural context in other regions, including frankly that of the South Koreans and the Japanese, that is almost certainly a bridge too far in the near future.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The way I have been thinking about this is that the best we may have is this club mantra, where we have got some organisations such as AUKUS that bring together the UK, the Australians and the US. There has been discussion about broadening that to the Japanese now. There's the idea of using the Quad at this point, as we have already discussed. One of the challenges with the Quad has been the Indian-Russian relationship, which has been a little complicating there. Even though the Indians have a historical competitive streak with the Chinese, they have fought recent border wars.

What I would say is probably more likely over the near future is for the relationships on a bilateral and informal multilateral organisational structure to improve. I don't think we are going to get a NATO any time in the near future. We can push as hard as we can; I just don't think most states in the region are likely to do that.

However, one of the areas that I think we are likely to see some progress on is intelligence sharing. To start to expand the intelligence relationships with a broader group of countries? That is certainly possible. To share a sensitive technology? We have already seen that with AUKUS.

For me, AUKUS is less about nuclear-powered submarines and more about sharing sensitive technology. The US has not been a particularly good partner on sharing technology, even to strong allies and partners.

Q128 Chair: We feel that at this end.

Seth Jones: Yes. Well, it is the bureaucracy that is part of the foreign military sales—or FMS—and ITAR. The restrictions involved need to evolve with the wartime environment that now exists. We are in a war, right now, in Ukraine, against the Russians, and tensions have increased in the Indo-Pacific. So I would say that more than a NATO right now, which I just do not see as politically feasible for many countries, we should at least start to reduce barriers in a range of areas—and, frankly, increase them, in some cases, where it involves sharing technology with the Chinese. We have seen some countries willing to limit what technology, including microchips, they may want to export to the Chinese. So I think there are some steps that can be taken that are short of a NATO.

Q129 Chair: It is clearly a journey that needs to be explored. John, did you want to quickly come in?

John Hemmings: Just a quick two-finger on the national technology industrial base, or NTIB. The UK, Australia and Canada now legally belong inside this entity—a legal entity inside the United States. It has been called a possible defence industry free trade zone. Nothing has really happened with it.

I suggest that the Committee might be interested to look into that further. It does have ramifications for the ability of at least four of the Five Eyes to form the capability that Seth just mentioned. That is not an alliance, but it would certainly provide the bedrock for the manufacturing capability that we would need in any proper conflict.



Q130 Sarah Atherton: Hello, both. There has been some intonation, not least from the US Secretary of Defense, that the UK could focus elsewhere, freeing up the US to focus on the Indo-Pacific and China. Do you have any reflections on that comment?

John Hemmings: We have had a steady drum beat of UK MoD out here, many of them trying to answer that question. I do not envy them, because, as noted in your earlier session, the resources and the priority are the two big issues that the UK faces right now, and all of it during an energy crisis and economic onslaught. My suggestion is that, to some extent, there is a sort of either/or, and that is promoted in DC as well, on these two different things.

When it comes to resources, a ship cannot be in two places, but I think that we tend to focus on platforms—"What platforms can the UK put in the region?" We have not mentioned the hybrid capabilities that the UK could bring to the region. We have not mentioned, perhaps, counter-interference or counter-influence, and the fact that the MoD has a lot of that capability in dealing with strategic communications.

So there are other elements. I do think that, obviously, the UK will have to prioritise the nearer theatre. That is just normal and right. Many years ago, I was much more bullish on this, and thought the UK should be all-in on the Indo-Pacific, but I have come to see, particularly after Ukraine, that the UK has closer theatres to deal with.

The presence that you have put in—I will go back to Veerle's point, from the first session, about the Indian ocean. It strikes me that having the odd carrier strike group or frigate coming out: those sorts of drum beats, once in a while, are very helpful.

It sends a great message, for us, as well as for our allies, to see you out. But the basing of large platforms is probably beyond difficult for you. I would suggest that what Veerle mentioned earlier—that focus on the Indian ocean—would give you a closeness to your traditional Middle East presence and Persian Gulf presence. In addition, you already have that sort of relationship with India that that could become a greater enabler if you really worked that relationship. It strikes me that, of course you will always have that relationship with north-east Asia—Japan specifically is the very strong one—but having that permanent heavy platform presence, other than the odd rotations? I cannot see the logic for you extending it more than you have already done.

Sarah Atherton: Thanks, John. Any further comments, Seth?

Seth Jones: There has been a range of discussion on this subject. First of all, the US-UK relationship is deep and historical; it is very strong, and it will continue to be that way in my view. The challenge with the Indo-Pacific is—unlike in some other regions—there is a huge tyranny of distance, time and space. That means it is very difficult to cover areas just because of how large the expanse is, including on the maritime side. With the war going on in Ukraine right now, and a revanchist Russia, the



expectations for countries outside of the Indo-Pacific to do a lot, even the UK, are relatively low right now. The UK has a lot to focus on in its own region. There is a recognition of this. The UK has been instrumental in providing aid to the Ukrainians. That includes various types of aid, including diplomatic support on the sanctions.

When it comes to potential UK assistance in the Indo-Pacific, there was obviously awareness of the HMS Queen Elizabeth carrier strike task group and its deployment, and the relationship, for example, between the UK and the US marine corps, including on those F-35Bs. But when it comes to help, aid and the UK's relationship with the US and others in the Indo-Pacific, I think it is probably less about big platforms and large numbers, and much more about sensitive technology sharing with key allies and partners in the region. AUKUS, obviously, is critical, as is intelligence sharing, including on Chinese and other activity, and assistance, if there is some kind of conflict, on sanctions or diplomatic pressure.

John has already mentioned cyber and space capabilities. When you look at GCHQ for example, both defence and offence cyber capabilities are significant, as, probably, are some other areas, including the industrial base if there is need for additional long-range fire capabilities or others as part of a protracted conflict or even to strengthen deterrence. The UK has a very strong industrial base, particularly relative to other countries in both the Indo-Pacific and Europe. Those are the things that I see as critical to the US-UK relationship in the Indo-Pacific, rather than a large military posture.

Q131 Derek Twigg: Thanks. Moving on to Taiwan, what role do you expect the US to play if any conflict breaks out in the Indo-Pacific region? The second part of my question is: is the US commitment to defend Taiwan rock solid, and are there any factors that might change that commitment? I do not know who wants to go first. Shall we start with John?

John Hemmings: Yes. I will make one point on the last question quickly. I wonder if you would not—drawing on Seth's point on relevant platforms—put more people on the ground in INDOPACOM; I know you are raising the numbers, but when compared to the Australian and Japanese presence here, it might be helpful for future raising up just to have that capability.

Going to the question on Taiwan, we just did a study funded by the Department of Defense, which essentially asked allies and partners from Taiwan, Japan, ROK, the EU and others about a Taiwan contingency. The findings were very instructive. Essentially, if the United States did not intervene in a Taiwan contingency, it would be devastating to our allies and partners and they would really start to question our ability. Many of them, like Japan and Korea, would also start to question our ability to protect them through extended deterrence, so they might seek nuclear weapons. If we intervene and still lose, we face massive reputation cost, but the alliances are not as at risk. Those are the views that came out of

policy elites from the countries that we surveyed and that we had in the Track 1.5 dialogues.

I find that rationale very compelling, and I think it would drive US motivations towards Taiwan. We have already seen President Biden say that Taiwan is a democracy and a close partner of the United States, and that we would defend it. There is legislation that says we are compelled to, but that strategic logic is, to me, very compelling.

One last point is that, particularly after Ukraine, a Chicago think-tank—their name escapes me—has seen that 70% of Americans believe we should intervene but not have boots on ground, but the number that said boots on ground was still pretty high: it was 40%. Ultimately, it is going to be a presidential decision, but you can see the public starting to move in that direction.

Seth Jones: On the question of how committed the US is to defending Taiwan, I think John is right in laying out the US commitment to it. When you look at some analyses, some polling and some war gaming, you see that the specifics of a conflict, if one were to emerge, might matter to some degree.

For example, we have run some games recently where there is somewhat of a unilateral declaration of independence that comes from Taiwan, so the escalation actually happens on the Taiwan side, not the Chinese side. That may cause some heartburn in the US, depending on how that situation evolves. The more it has been pushed by Taiwan, as opposed to something closer to Chinese naked aggression, in the way we have seen with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the more it looks like Taiwan may be a precursor to a conflict and may have escalated. That may frankly create some challenges in how the US responds.

A conflict may emerge as part of a broader expansion of Chinese power and influence. We have already seen the increase in Chinese military bases, and not just in the Indo-Pacific and Pakistan; we have seen an expansion in Djibouti, and Chinese interest in the United Arab Emirates and west Africa, and last year in the Solomon Islands. As you take a step back, this looks like Chinese revanchism.

Taiwan is part of a much bigger effort of the Chinese to increase not just regional but global military power, diplomatic influence and economic power. A conflict and tension in Taiwan is part of a much bigger issue. We have seen from Republicans and Democrats in the US that there may be bipartisan support for pushing back against China in that kind of context.

One of the most recent interesting developments, from talking to a range of US corporations, most of which are multinational, is how many US companies now might be supportive of sanctions in the case of outright Chinese aggression. It is not unlike what those companies were willing to do after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Obviously, much more is at stake with China because there is a lot more trade, but recent discussions that we have had with some senior executives have indicated along those lines.

Finally, on the war games and our war game of Taiwan, we have just completed a rather large one. I would say that what we found in 24 separate iterations was that the US does not join relatively quickly. I think John said something along these lines. That makes it much harder for Taiwan to resist an invasion. A quick response from the US will be critical. There are a couple of other things, if folks are interested, that I am happy to highlight, but I will conclude my remarks there.

Q132 Chair: To conclude this Taiwan piece, I was in Taiwan just before Christmas and it was a fascinating visit. When you go there, you definitely get a different feel for the situation than from here in the UK. President Xi has made it very clear that it is his objective; he wants to somehow return Taiwan to the China fold, and he will do that by force if necessary. Do we need to be better at explaining the consequences of taking Taiwan by force to the global economy, recognising that it will lead to sanctions on our side and counter-sanctions from China and then a break in the movement of microchips, which Taiwan provides? Would it be fair to say that the economic fallout from Ukraine would be completely dwarfed by some form of confrontation from China with Taiwan?

John Hemmings: I do not have the numbers in front of me, but they are considerable. This is the first and second largest economy, with Japan the third largest, essentially freezing trade in the world's busiest trading region. It is a nightmare, and of course the tech sector is as dependent as it is on the semiconductor industry. I do think we need to highlight that, perhaps to the PRC.

To some extent there is not a rational actor approach in Xi Jinping's mind. He has taken trillions off the Chinese stock market in order to regulate his own technology sector. He doesn't care about imposing cost on his own economy if he thinks it is good for the party and the regime. I find it really worrying that he has a very strong ideological bent.

I believe it was in the summer of 2021 when \$1.5 trillion was lost from data companies because of heavy-handedness. It was all about making them share their data in real time with the state. I don't see that he is going to impose a rational approach. I don't think that will deter him, unfortunately. Having said that, we should still try.

Germany and the EU specifically need to step up. They need to realise the importance of that, because they will be critical. The Chinese worry about the German position much more than that of other Europeans because of their leadership over the EU. If you have Japan, the United States and the EU—those large markets—suddenly denying Chinese goods, the Chinese really have a big problem.

Seth Jones: When we look at the economic damage caused by a potential war, obviously much would depend on the length of the war that we are talking about—whether it is short or prolonged or protracted—and the geographic expanse. One could envision an expanded war that hits multiple countries and starts to look more like a world war, rather just a US-China war. If we look at escalation to nuclear weapons, even in the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Taiwan scenario, China would be shooting standoff capabilities and launching amphibious assaults from the Chinese mainland. There is built into this scenario a worry about escalation to nuclear war. Depending on how a conflict were to evolve, the nuclear fallout could be extraordinary. In fact, I think in almost any scenario one looks at, whether it is a war game, analysis or table-top exercise, you are seeing significant military attrition, large numbers of civilian casualties and fatalities, and severe economic disruptions that would, I think, dwarf the war in Ukraine with the possibility of nuclear escalation and the massive environmental and humanitarian implications that come with that.

It highlights several things for me. War would be a terrible outcome for all sides. On both the US and UK sides, we need to be focused on deterrence, part of which is highlighting the costs that the Chinese would have to suffer—economic, military and so on—of a major war. That brings us then to the concept of how we successfully deter China from that, which I actually think is possible. One aspect I think we are going to have to be careful with is to closely work with Taiwan. A unilateral declaration of independence would not help in that situation. I think there is some diplomatic work that needs to continue with Taiwan, but highlighting the costs involved to the Chinese, with a military that has not fought a war since the 1970s, is critical moving forward, in the way the Soviets were deterred in the Fulda Gap during the cold war.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed to Seth Jones and John Hemmings for allowing us to explore much further the Indo-Pacific and the UK's role, along with the United States. We will return to this subject, no doubt, on a number of occasions. Thank you particularly because I think it is something like 6.30 am DC time, so we are very pleased you were able to join us. You can go off for breakfast now. From the Committee, we are grateful to you and grateful to the staff here; I am grateful to my Committee. That brings this Defence Committee hearing to a conclusion.